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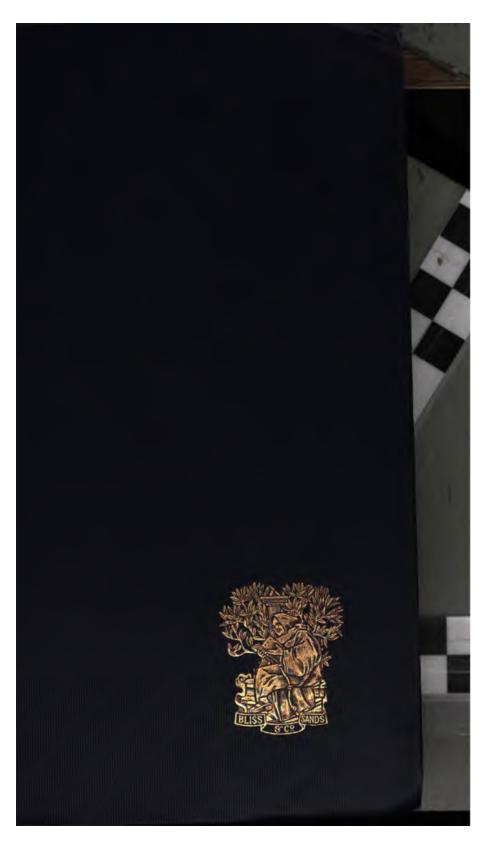
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A DEPARTURE FROM TRADITION



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A DEPARTURE FROM TRADITION

And Other Stories

Ву

ROSALINE MASSON

Author of
"My Poor Niece," "Use and Abuse of English"

LONDON:
BLISS SANDS & Co.
MDCCCXCVIII

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Dedicated to

A. H. H. AND G. W. H.

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A DEPARTURE FROM TRADITION

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A DEPARTURE FROM TRADITION

CHAPTER I

"MY good fellow," I said, a trifle patronisingly, "a man wants something more nowadays than a mere doll—a plaything. He expects his wife to be his companion."

"I am sure I have heard that before," said George reflectively. "It has a familiar ring. Is it from 'Hamlet,' by any chance?"

"His intellectual equal," I went on, unheedingly.

"Oh, come now, old chap, draw it mild. Your *fiancle* mayn't be anything special, but she is no idiot!"

"Capable of sharing his-"

"She'll probably take it all, my boy, and allow you a pound a week—on account."

"And any one who knows Edith," I went on, leaning forward and taking my pipe out of my mouth as I warmed to my subject, "knows that she——"

"Oh, good heavens! yes; and so does any one who knows you! Has it all by heart."

I resumed my pipe with dignity, and leaned back.

George Seton was my oldest friend, and as such was licensed. I had been engaged for two months, and I daresay I had talked to him a good deal about Edith during that period; but I was going to be married to her to-morrow. I wouldn't quarrel with old George this last night.

"George," I said presently, "you'll have to come and stay with us occasionally."

"Yes, poor old chap," he said feelingly. "Just send me a wire any time you are in a difficulty."

I glared at him. "I don't anticipate being in any difficulty,' I said stiffly, getting up and knocking the as'ies out of my pipe.

"Ah, well," said George, "before six months are over you will probably remember my words, and fly to my faithful friendship as to a——"

But I never heard his simile, for I left the room.

Six months! It was, as it turned out, barely two and a half! But George is a gentleman and a good fellow: he never reminded me.

Next day, George was "best man." He saw us off at the station, and handed a bundle of papers and magazines in at the carriage window (as if we were going to read papers and magazines!); and the last I saw of my old friend was his tall, lithe figure on the platform, where he stood waving an ironical adieu. As the train moved slowly out of the station I turned to my wife, who was busy getting the rice out of the lace of her dress.

- "I like Mr Seton," she said.
- "He is a trifle cynical," I remarked.
- "Clever young men usually are," replied Edith.
 - "I am not, dear," I said reproachfully.
- "You dear goose, who ever supposed you were?" she answered.

We went up the Rhine, and across Switzerland into Italy; and we came back by Paris. I couldn't speak any of their outlandish lingoes; but my wife was rather a good hand at them all.

- "I didn't know they taught you modern stuff at Newnham," I said to her once. "I thought it was all dead languages."
- "Oh, I've always known French," she said carelessly.

- "And German?"
- "Ah well, German is absolutely necessary if you are to go at all into the modern school of philosophy, or if you want to keep in touch with Science."
 - "Oh!" I said.
- "And of course Italian comes very easy to any one who knows Latin."
 - "Very," I replied.

During the week we spent in Florence my wife quoted enough of Browning to have filled two sides of the *Pink'Un*. I learned to be very sharp about it, after one or two awkward slips. You see, Browning doesn't seem to be like any ordinary poet, where you can tell that it is poetry because it couldn't possibly be prose. Sometimes the things that Edith said sounded so natural that I answered them, and that made me feel foolish. I didn't like Florence.

We came home at the beginning of October, and I made up my mind to read French and German a good deal, and—other things. That is the good of marrying a girl who isn't just merely pretty: she keeps you up. And Edith was pretty; but it was rather a severe type.

- "I wonder if you are a good housekeeper, dear," I said fondly, as we got into the train at Dover.
 - "Oh, I hate housekeeping," she answered.

- "What will you do then?—have a house-keeper?"
- "Well, I have a plan of that sort. But I'll tell you all about it very soon."

And she did.

It was in a quiet corner of the Park, down by the Serpentine, the day before we left London, that Edith propounded her scheme to me. She had on a very smart new frock that I hadn't seen before, and something pink in her bonnet, and her little nose was tilted up into the air, and her grey eyes were surveying the world with an air of calm and judicial consideration that was habitual to them.

"Harry," she said to me presently, "we go home to-morrow."

I said something foolish.

"And I have been thinking," she went on, "that it would be better to begin as we mean to continue."

I assented.

- " Now, dear, you are not clever."
- "And you are."
- "Oh, not really!—no. But, compared with you, I am, of course."
- "But, my dear girl, I have been to Oxford, and I---"
- "But, my dear boy, I have been to Cambridge, and I——"

"Oh yes, you took your degree, and I never did. But you hadn't the calls upon your time that I had. A man can't read if he—well, if he does other things, you know. That is why a girl goes to college: I've heard you say so. She couldn't read at home."

"Precisely so. Now, I want to continue reading."

I looked down at my placid and calm little helpmate, and a chilly horror came over me. "Decidedly, Edith!" I said, with forced heartiness. "We have an excellent library at Oakhurst."

"It wasn't space, it was time I thought of claiming."

"Yes?" I queried vaguely.

There was a pause.

"Shall we sit down on this seat?" she asked.

"Certainly."

We sat down, and my wife unfurled a pale green silk parasol, and then she unfolded her plan.

"You see, Harry, you aren't clever," she said, in even, unimpassioned tones. "You are a dear, good, manly, chivalrous boy—that is why I liked you. I am so tired of the young man with brains who hails us as brothers. You have some of the old feeling about women left: it is such a rest."

[&]quot; I——"

"Don't interrupt.—Now, you have absolutely nothing to do. You have no profession, no pursuits—I mean, no serious pursuits. I don't count hunting and billiards. Now I am translating the 'Allegoriæ Homeri' of Heraclides; and I am getting up Political Economy, so as to be able to take an intelligent interest in the questions of the day; and I contribute the articles on social and religious reform to the Monthly Investigator; and I am bringing out some critical essays on the 'Correlation of Inconceivables in Transcendental Apperception': and, when they have gone to press, I have it in my mind to take up a subject that has long had a curious fascination for me-'The Ontogenesis of the Ego, considered in Relation to the Evolution of the Indeterminate.' Now all this takes time."

"It must indeed," I answered faintly.

"I was sure you would own that, Harry! Now, it seems to me that, looking at it from a perfectly unprejudiced point of view, given two people setting up housekeeping—one easynatured, idle, but very sensible about practical matters; the other intellectual, nervous, overstrained, and pressed for time—there is but one conclusion."

"Good Lord! Edith, what are you driving at?"

My wife shut up her parasol. "You must do the housekeeping, Harry," she said decidedly.

- "I do the housekeeping! What the dickens do you mean?"
- "That is the second time you have sworn, dear."
- "I beg your pardon. But—see the cook, and that sort of thing?" I looked at her anxiously.
 - "Why not?" she asked coldly.
- "But—it's generally the wife who does all that!"
- "It is generally the wife who has nothing else to do."

Well, I argued for some time, for I felt my fate was trembling in the balance; but Edith was very firm, and I knew from the first it was a foregone conclusion; so at last I made a virtue of a necessity, and said I would try it for a month or two, and see how I got on. My wife was very pleased when I consented, and was charming to me all the way home; but I'm afraid I didn't respond. I was sulky. I couldn't help looking at all the other men I passed, and wondering if any of them did the housekeeping.

Since the death of my mother, four years previous to my marriage, I had not been very

much at Oakhurst. An old housekeeper-a former nurse of the family—was in charge, and she and my groom managed very nicely for me when I was alone, or, as was frequently the case, had George Seton with me. When I had a larger party, at Christmas or in autumn, my married sister, Mrs Jack Preston, used to come and act hostess for me, and bring her servants. She was a very managing little person, and it was she who had seen to pensioning off my old housekeeper and engaging the proper staff for Edith and me. I could not help wondering, during those first few days, what Polly would think of Edith's and my arrangement, for Polly would no more have thought of allowing Captain lack to interfere in her domestic management than—ah well!—I wouldn't have cared for sister Poll as a wife.

The first evening at home Edith and I didn't say much to one another about the housekeeping. It hung over us like a cloud, and made our conversation a little strained. While we dined, I cast furtive glances at the servants with an interest they would never, under ordinary circumstances, have inspired me with. Our establishment was small. I am not a rich man, though I have enough to live on comfortably. A sleek youth waited at dinner, and a very smart maid. I loathed

the former, and feared the latter. I discovered next day that besides this there were a blunt-featured, strong-armed housemaid, and a stout and awe-inspiring cook, with an attendant satellite whom it appeared the cook took charge of, and with whom I was not expected to interfere.

My trials began next morning. I stood about aimlessly after breakfast, warming myself, and scanning the newspaper. My wife had another copy of the same newspaper, and she sat reading it with exasperating quiet. Presently the smart maid came in, and, going up to my wife, said in a soft murmur: "The cook bade me ask you, ma'am——"

"My husband attends to all that!" said my wife, slightly waving her hand in my direction, but not looking up from her paper.

The maid stared for a moment, dumfounded. She made a step towards me, but thought better of it, and fled. Presently the sleek youth came in. I imagined he was smiling.

"William!" I said to him sharply—it was the first name I could think of—"let Charles know at the stables that I shall want my horse round at once."

"Yessir!" and he vanished.

Still my wife never moved. My heart began

to beat. I had never known it do such a thing before. I am not a nervous man—I am a bit of an athlete, and am used to feeling myself, even in men's society, muscularly superior; but the dentist's waiting-room in our tender childhood was as nothing to this.

My wife got up. "I am now going to my study, dear," she said sweetly. "I must ask you to see that I am not interrupted till luncheon." At the door she turned and gave me one look.

I got up and walked right across the hall and down the passage and into the kitchen, and found myself standing face to face with the cook before I had given myself time to think. The cook wasn't the worst—she suggested all the dinner, and looked at me in a pitying, patronising kind of way. But she would tell me a long yarn about the saucepans being all burnt, and she took me into a place behind the kitchen, and insisted on my looking at them for myself. There we surprised the attendant satellite, who was doing something horrid with her fingers and a greasy dish that had held bacon. She gave an hysterical giggle, and received a stern reprimand from the cook in consequence. This upset me so that I dropped my eye-glass into a saucepan I was peering into.

I took down a list of all the things the cook wanted, and promised to telegraph to London for them. I told her there was a man there who got my cigars and everything for me, and he would see to it; but still I left her looking unsatisfied.

But the cook was not all. The housemaid waylaid me in the passage. She wanted to know about the thorough-cleaning, and if James (so his name wasn't William) was to blacken the boots. I said that certainly James was to blacken the boots: he seemed an idle fellow: and I told her I strongly objected to the process of thorough-cleaning, and would never sanction it. She might get up in the night, if she liked, and "thorough-clean"; but the rooms were always to present their normal aspect during the day. Then I tried to escape: but the smart tablemaid was waiting for me at the front door. She wanted to know about "Sundays out," and if James was to carry up her coals for her. I told her that I was sure James would carry anything she wanted, and that she must settle about her Sundays herself: I never interfered with people's religious observances. She was the only one who looked pleased.

Then I seized my hat and crop and bolted. Charles, my own old groom, was leading Silver. He put two fingers up to his ruddy locks, and then suddenly he guffawed. So he had heard too. I rode off at an evil pace, and took across country as soon as possible.

I was rather proud of my little dinner that evening. The curry was excellent—it was cook's idea, but there was no need to tell Edith that. But some sort of pudding came up instead of a fruit tart. I remembered ordering a fruit tart—at least cook had suggested it, and I had thanked her. I was a little put out by the pudding; it was taking a liberty to alter my orders. After dinner I was still more put out. I was naturally aggrieved that my wife said nothing in praise of the repast: a man likes to be praised when he has taken trouble about the dinner. And then, while we were having our coffee, I rang and told James to put the whisky and soda into the library at ten, and he stood grinning in the doorway like that dog in the Psalms, and observed: "Yessir. please sir, the missis said sir-" And then looked at my wife.

Edith glanced hastily up, and had the grace to get a little pink and confused.

"Oh, Harry, yes! I said—I thought you wouldn't mind—you see—the library—my papers! I told them to put the tray in here."

"Put the tray in here, James," I said, withering him with my eye.

When we were alone my wife apologised, and I said it did not matter this once, but I could not maintain any authority with the servants if she interfered in my department. I would as soon think of writing her articles on religious and social reform for the *Monthly Investigator*.

Edith was very contrite, and my sense of unanswerable rectitude lasted me until I faced the cook next morning, and, with the first glance, remembered with a shock that I had utterly forgotten to telegraph for her utensils.

I think I apologised too much: it is bad policy. I lost my power over the cook from that day—the second day.

CHAPTER II

I SHALL never forget the graphic descriptive power my cook betrayed when she told me about the black beetles. The very simplicity of her language and the directness of her thought made me feel as if the horrid things were crawling slowly up my back. I am not

interested in zoology, and I left the matter to Charles, the groom, who prides himself on his veterinary arts. I don't know what was done. I thought it safer not to ask. Then, no sooner did the beetles sink into oblivion than it appeared that the kitchen swarmed with mice, and that a particularly powerful-looking one had sent the kitchen-maid into hysterics. I again consulted Charles, and he suggested a cat; so, when I was passing through the village, I told the post-mistress that I would give any child a shilling who would bring me a fine, healthy kitten. The following day was Saturday, and there was a meet at Sir Patrick Christie's. The weather was perfect, and we found almost immediately, and had a glorious run. On the way home, spattered and weary and hungry, I suddenly nearly jumped out of my saddle, and an emphatic expression rose to my lips. I had completely forgotten to order the dinner!

All the way back I was hot and cold with misery and anxiety. What might not have happened in my absence? Had that stout cook been kind, and risen to the occasion? Or had she—horrors!—sent up to my wife? Or had she simply taken no steps whatever, and should we sit down to flowers and salt and dinner-rolls?

premises, avoiding the half-opened drawing-room door. I found James in the pantry, cleaning knives and whistling—happy dog! I would rather it had been one of the maids; but I was desperate.

"James," I whispered, "what has cook done, do you know?"

James grinned. "She's egsiting herself, sir."

"Yes, yes, I daresay! But she has managed somehow, I suppose?"

"She says, sir, she ain't agoing to give 'em nothink, not if they starves, sir!"

I squared my shoulders. "You need not repeat what cook allowed herself to remark in the privacy of the kitchen," I told him sternly. "Has she actually cooked no food?"

James stared at me. "Well, sir, we could 'ardly expect 'er for to cook anythink, sir, under the circumstances, sir; but Mary—she's a tender-'earted gal, Mary—she did make bold to ask a drop o' milk."

"Milk!" I ejaculated.

"Yessir. Mary said, sir, says she, being so young, sir, says she, and none o' their fault, it go to 'er 'eart for to 'ear 'em squeak."

"Enough of this, James!" I cried angrily. "This is not the way to speak of your mistress and myself. I will see cook."

"I don't rightly understand you, sir, axin'

yer pardon, but I warn't speaking of the missus and you, sir. But I wouldn't go a-near cook, sir, not if I was you—no, I wouldn't! She says you've done it o' purpose to plague 'er. She's in a orful way along of them cats," he added confidentially.

"Cats? What cats?"

"Why, sir, that's what I've been a-telling you of. I thought as you was axin'."

"What cats?" I repeated, a growing disquiet creeping over me.

"Why, the cats as you sent in from the village, sir! Twenty-one 'as arrived, and they be still coming, all sizes. Ten tabbies, sir, nothink to speak of; two whites, sir, which I 'ear is generally deaf; five black as soot, sir; two sandy; and one tortoise-shell as is wuth keeping. Cook's egsited."

The dinner paled by comparison. Beetles, mice, cats! It was as bad as the plagues of Egypt. I went up and tubbed and changed. The dinner was excellent, and I gave orders that every child should be sent for, and given another shilling to claim and take away its own animal. The whole transaction cost me two pounds nine. In the long-run I fancy it must have cost me considerably more, for the kitten we retained, though it was of a very tender age, regaled itself on beef and mutton, several

roast ducks, bottled beer, ham and eggs, cold game, fresh butter, Stilton cheese, crystallised ginger, green tea, and cognac. Besides being so unblushingly omnivorous, it broke a good deal of crockery, a Venetian glass decanter, and a piece of valuable Sèvres; and it was also guilty of denting the silver urn by falling heavily against it.

The next plague that visited me was the monthly bills at the beginning of November. The cook had managed the orders to the tradespeople, and now they all sent in little account-books. I added up the totals on a bit of blotting-paper after I had made out the cheques. Then I multiplied that by twelve, and added what my horse and man cost me, and what my tailor cost me, and double what my tailor cost me for what my wife's dress would probably come to when her trousseau was worn out; and then I put down the servants' wages, and a good round sum for a holiday, and then I added it all up. It came to exactly a hundred pounds more than our joint annual income. I halved my wife's dress allowance, and was just going to add it all up again, when a host of other expenses crowded in on my memory—cabs, my club, theatre tickets, doctor's bills. I felt so depressed that Edith noticed my wan looks.

"I—I'm not sleeping very well, dear," I said. This was perfectly true: I had so much to think of at night.

"Dear me!" she cried, opening her grey eyes. "Neither am I! I have been working too hard, I think. We must both have a change soon."

Alas, poor girl! She was all unconscious that ruin stared us in the face. I gazed at her sorrowfully. She was not looking well—dark rings encircled her eyes, and she was pale and thin.

"You are overworking yourself," I said with sudden conviction.

She laughed nervously. "Well, perhaps I am," she owned.

That night, a fork dropped from my nerveless hand, and fell with a clang. Edith started and screamed.

"Your nerves are overwrought," I told her.

Half an hour later she dropped her coffee spoon into the fender. I bounded off my chair.

"Why, you have nerves too, Harry!" she exclaimed. "Are you smoking too much?"

We had in the local man to see us both, and he spoke to me seriously about letting Edith work so hard.

"She is a delicate, highly strung organism,"

he said sternly; "and I warn you that if we don't take care, we shall have her on our hands with a nervous fever. She tells me she works six hours a day. That must be put a stop to at once. I shall prescribe a tonic; but she must have complete rest."

I felt very dispirited. The medical man evidently blamed me, and I was too weak and crushed to complain.

My wife obeyed the doctor for some days; but the result was disastrous to me. She went about the house and noticed things. She had a way of touching furniture and books with her handkerchief, and, of course, the dust came off. Then she sighed and looked at me. I took no notice. It was most interfering.

It was about this time that my cook gave me warning. I ran upstairs and told Edith.

"You'll have to get another," she said calmly. I felt sick and faint.

"And I think you had better dismiss Jane the housemaid, too," she went on. "The house is getting very dirty."

"I fancy you had better leave that to me, my dear," I remarked with some asperity. "And may I ask you how you came to know that the housemaid's name is Jane?"

About a week after this, Lady Christie sent a note to say that she heard we were looking

for a cook, and that hers was leaving her, and that she could send her to be interviewed. Lady Christie wrote to my wife: people cling to these old-fashioned prejudices, and seem to think that it must necessarily be the lady of the house who looks after domestic matters.

That evening the cook came. My wife remained in the room, at my request, and busied herself with a newspaper. The woman brought her umbrella in with her, and stood in the middle of the floor.

- "Oh-ah! Good evening!" I said.
- "Good evening, sir."
- "Won't you take a seat?" I asked, wheeling forward an armchair.

My wife rustled a newspaper.

The woman preferred to stand, so I stood too—first on one foot, and then on the other—for I couldn't think what the dickens I should say to her next.

Suddenly I had a brilliant inspiration. "Do you wear pink cotton dresses in the morning?" I asked.

- "Henry!" my wife exclaimed, looking over the top of her newspaper.
- "Er—er—can you cook a steak without letting the gravy run out?" I hastily went on.

The woman seemed to think she could.

"Well, I think you will suit," I told her.

"Wages, reason of leaving, age, church, length of character, parentage," prompted a voice from behind the newspaper.

The woman said she did not think the situation would suit her, and she went away.

My wife was curiously put out, and audibly wondered what Lady Christie would think. I made up my mind to have a list of questions written out before I interviewed another, and to take down the answers in writing.

Next day the housemaid gave warning. was terribly upset. I could scarcely eat a crumb all day, and I lay awake from two until My wife noticed my pallid visage when I came down to breakfast. I had somehow run short of coals, and we had no fires in the house that day, and nothing could be cooked. We neither of us had much appetite, so it didn't really matter. Also Mary was ill, I was told, and Jane waited on us. Her boots creaked; and, in the state Edith's and my nerves were in, we could not stand that. I wrote for coals, and sent James for the doctor, and then I went to my smoking-room and sat looking at the cigar ends lying among yesterday's ashes in the fender, and thought over the position. Perhaps it was the cigar ends, or perhaps the odour of stale smoke, or

perhaps it was the intervention of my good angel, but suddenly George Seton came into my mind, and hope entered my heart.

I found my wife walking up and down the library to keep warm. The dust had gathered on her books and papers since she had been idle.

"Edith," I said, "I find I shall have to run up to town this afternoon to see about servants."

"Very well," she replied listlessly.

Then I walked to the station and wired to George: "In a difficulty. Dine with me at the club to-night."

It wasn't till after the train had fairly started that I remembered I had wired the identical words George had used to me the night before my marriage. Ah, well! How strangely things come round!

George dined with me at the club. We had a cosy little dinner. It was quite like old times. Afterwards, we lit our pipes. It was difficult to tell George all about it—he would laugh. He laughed till I thought he would choke, and then he asked me to let him think it over, and he would breakfast with me next morning at my hotel, and give me the results of his reflections. George has a good strong chin; and, though he is not a married man, it is not

always married men who understand women the best. In fact, I sometimes fancy that men who understand women the best remain unmarried. Anyway, after I had put my brief into George's hands next morning, I somehow felt a great weight off my mind.

I returned home in the course of the day.

"Have you found servants?" was my wife's first question.

"No," I replied; "I have not."

"Then what are you going to do, Harry? You really must bestir yourself! It is only a fortnight now till they leave, and several people are asked to dine here on the 4th, and I'm sure——" Edith had grown a trifle irritable in these days. It was a good sign.

"My dear," I said to her, "I am not going to engage servants. I find that they are completely old-fashioned, and that we are behind the time in submitting to this obsolete custom. Now, whatever else people may say of us, they cannot say that we are behind the time, or that obsolete customs find consideration at our hands."

"No," my wife agreed. Did I detect a tinge of regret in her tone?

"I find that in London most up-to-date people live on the co-operative system. We can't manage this, living, as we do, in the country. Our houses are not adapted to modern ideas. There is a kitchen, there are several pantries—a whole suite of rooms dedicated to the service of pampered menials, who eat our bread and take our money, and whose slaves we are."

Edith looked impressed. I felt I had done well—it was almost word for word what George had jotted down for me.

"And so," I went on, gaining courage and dignity, "I intend adopting another expedient, which many of my friends have had recourse to with infinite success. I am going to dismiss all our servants, and employ lady-helps."

"Oh!" said my wife.

"I—I have seen one or two already," I went on, blushing at the fib, for I am a truthful man.

My wife mistook my faltering tones. "What were they like?" she asked.

"They were simply charming."

"Oh! But would they—do the work?"

"Ah, well," I replied evasively, "one leaves that to them, you know."

"How do they dress?"

"I am not good at describing dress," I replied, "but I think they wear—well, the sort of thing you have got on."

- "Nonsense, Harry!" said my wife sharply; and, looking at her, I became aware she had on some sort of morning robe, with a profusion of lace and ribbons.
 - "Would they-dine with us?"
- "Edith," I said, with an assumption of sternness, "if you for a moment suppose that I should permit any gently nurtured lady to feel herself slighted in this house, or to be shown even the negative discourtesy implied by——"
- "Don't be silly! How can a woman cook the dinner and eat it at one and the same time?"
- "A clever woman is capable of anything! I am told it is wonderful how these lady-helps adapt themselves—how they get through their arduous domestic tasks, and yet appear always at leisure. The household matters move on oiled wheels; and one is never made aware of any haste or disquiet. It is a wonderful gift that some women have. The lady I saw seemed very well read, by the way. She told me she was a Browningite. I thought it would be so companionable for you, dear. But she was very interested in cookery too, so I shan't be left quite out in the cold."

My wife's grey eyes opened to their extreme limit. She played with her rings nervously. "How many would you employ?" she asked presently.

"About six," I said, at random.

My wife got up from the table and stood by me on the hearthrug. "We—we should have no—no—time to ourselves," she murmured, in a quivering voice.

"Neither do we under the old yoke of servants."

"Six lady-helps! Wouldn't they—wouldn't they rather wonder that I didn't—I mean—they might think that I ought——"

"So do the servants," I said grimly.

There was a long pause, then I got up. "I will telegraph to them all to-day," I said, with a business-like promptness.

My wife flung herself into my arms. "Harry!" she sobbed, "Harry, Harry dear! I couldn't b—b—bear it! Give me the keys!"

When George Seton came to stay with us at Christmas, ours was the most charming house in all England, and my wife the best house-keeper in the world.

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A MODERN ALCESTIS

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A MODERN ALCESTIS

CHAPTER I

"AND you won't marry me, then?" he asked, going back to the original point, just as I thought I had explained it all to him.

- "I don't ever intend to enter the domestic service," I replied.
- "Does that mean that you are a 'New Woman'?"
 - "Comparatively new-twenty-three."
- "Ah, now you are flippant!" he cried, turning a white face and angry eyes to me.

We women have all more or less of the cat-and-mouse instinct, but there come times when we are genuinely sorry—ay, and even a trifle frightened.

"I'm not flippant!" I cried; "but I don't

want to marry! Why should I? Women are so happy nowadays! They have everything they want without marrying. They used to marry to be independent, and for the excitement of the thing, you know; now they have independence and pleasure without, and so they don't marry, unless——"

"Yes?"

"Well, unless the spirit move them to, I suppose," said I lamely.

He smiled grimly. "I wonder if anything ever moves a woman except a desire to please herself!"

- "I wonder you want to marry me, if that be your opinion of us!"
- "I wonder I do! But I've wanted to ever since I first saw you. Why won't you marry me?"
- "Have you had a classical education?" I asked him.
 - "I was at Harrow," he replied sulkily.
- "It does not follow. Do you remember the story of Alcestis?"
 - "No, I don't."
 - " I said it did not follow!"
 - "What has the story got to do with us?"
- "If you remembered it, you would see. Alcestis consented to die and go down into Hades instead of her husband."

- "Well, I shouldn't ask you to do that, Miss Dayrell!"
 - "Oh, yes, you would—every day."
 - "What do you mean?"
- "Spring cleanings, and autumn outings, and tradesmen's bills, and church attendance, and afternoon calls," I enumerated.
 - "Would you kindly consent to explain?" So I explained.
- "Alcestis seems to the modern reader to be an unusually self-sacrificing heroine," I replied; "and her husband-Admetus, was he not called?—an unusually selfish lord and master. Indignation struggles with amusement when we read that Admetus first tried hard to persuade his parents to suffer death in his place, using the agreeable argument that their terms of existence were anyhow comparatively short. But the parents were obstinately deaf to reason, and were charmed when Alcestis dutifully undertook dying for her husband as part of the trivial round and the common task. The father of Admetus even led him aside, and earnestly suggested that a judicially selected relay of wives might postpone Hades indefinitely. The story struck me: that is why I remember it. Please don't think that I am as well up in all classical mythology. But really, Captain Despard, do we not see the enacting

of this melodrama every day of our lives? I have a great many married lady friends. They would themselves all deny it indignantly; but it is plain to the most casual observer that they, every one of them, make a practice of suffering daily perdition for their husbands."

I paused for effect—and breath. But Jack Despard continued in an attitude of polite attention.

"The nearest approach to Hades, nowadays, that I know of," I went on, "since we have eschewed the pit of fire and brimstone of our childhood, is the spring cleaning. You will allow this?"

"I don't know much about it," said Jack Despard meekly.

"Exactly so," I answered drily. "You were never required to go down into Hades; you probably went to your club instead. During the spring cleaning—which is a recognised necessity among the middle classes—the whole house smells of soft soap and furniture polish; and workmen are perched on ladders; and all the furniture is grouped in the centres of the floors, and covered with shrouds; and meals are irregular and unpalatable; and the servants are untidy and discomposed; and you can't find anything you want; and you are not able to ask a soul to come and see you; and you are disturbed at four in the morning by the

banshee moanings of chimney-sweeps; and all day long hammering goes on; and——"

"Oh, stop!" he implored.

"Well, during all this time, who arranges and supervises, and suffers uncomplainingly?—the wife! Who lives on a brown-teapot tea and bread and butter, brought when the servants feel inclined?—the wife! Who goes for a week's golf, or a little fishing with a friend?—the husband! Who, if he have to remain at home, grumbles incessantly, and considers himself ill-used, and dines daily at his club?—the husband! On this occasion, then, the wife clearly and distinctly suffers Hades on his behalf."

"He'd be awfully in the way."

"Oh, if it comes to that, Admetus would probably have been awfully in the way in Hades. Then again, take the autumn exodus to the seaside. Who travels with the servants and the luggage—boxes, baskets, hampers, wraps, gun-cases, violin-cases, baths, bales, tennis-racquets, golf-clubs, fishing-tackle, and wine-hampers?—the wife! Who comes next day, when the cook has had time to get reconciled to the kitchen range, and everything is unpacked and in order?—the husband! On this occasion, then, the wife clearly and distinctly suffers Hades on his behalf."

"Ye-es."

remarks, and remain from t Lady Ball, with her ear-trump slink into the library and sulk dinner, to which his wife consplitting headache, does he nshe did not send him a cup of t for a moment does he realis mortal hours or more she has Hades on his behalf."

"I do not see the use of ca ladies seem rather to like them."

"Admetus did not see the use he would probably have excused plea that Alcestis seemed rat. Again, take church attendance discuss that. But house-mov There are so many ways in wh perdition for their husbands! A I don't quite know what I said then to make him go away; but when he had wrung my hand and bolted, I sobbed till my head ached. Argument is very exhausting.

Next day Captain Despard called again. He was looking quite pleased, was wearing a flower, and had by no means the air of a rejected suitor. I felt angry. He took the cup of tea I handed to him, and sat down.

- "Miss Dayrell," he began at once, "I have been thinking all carefully over, and I've got an idea."
- "Have you?" I responded coldly. "I am exceedingly glad to hear it: ideas are rare nowadays."
- "Yes," he continued, unabashed; "and what is more, it is a capital idea."

He drank some tea, and then took a calm survey of our drawing-room, holding his cup in his hand, and craning his neck to examine, apparently, the stucco-work on our Adam's ceiling.

- "Do you ever have this room thoroughly cleaned?" he asked suddenly.
 - "Why, of course we do!" I cried, alarmed.
- "What makes you ask? Cobwebs?"
 - "Who sees to it?" he demanded sternly.
 - "Sees to it?" I repeated.
 - "Who gives the orders, and overlooks the

works, and supervises, so that it is properly done?"

"I do!" I exclaimed, still hunting the ceiling to discover the cobweb.

" Just so."

There was a change in his voice that arrested my attention; and when I glanced at him to discover its meaning, I noted a triumph on his face that should have warned me, but that only puzzled me.

- "Your mother died when you were a baby?" he asked me gently.
- "Yes," I said, still more puzzled to discover the analogy.
- "And your sister married and went out to India when you had just left school, I think?"
 - "Yes."
- "You must have found it difficult at first to manage this large house all by yourself?"
- "Oh, no! I enjoyed it. And father is very good and patient; he never interferes."
 - "He leaves it all to you?"
 - "Oh, entirely!"
 - "Where is your father at this moment?"
- "In the library. You must forgive his not appearing—he very rarely comes up to tea, because——"

I paused. It would be rather rude to tell him that father hated afternoon callers.

"Are you going abroad this spring?"

I began to wonder if trouble had not unhinged the poor young man, his conversation was so disjointed; and I told him gently, as you would tell a child, that we might go abroad later on, but that at present we had no plans, except that father was meditating a week's yachting.

"While the spring cleaning takes place?"

"Yes," I owned at once, amazed that he should guess this deep-seated domestic reason so accurately; and then I met his eye and saw the whole plot.

"It seems to me that, as you are already suffering the torments of Hades daily for your father's sake," he said, "you might consent to suffer a little of them for mine."

"I don't see that at all!" I exclaimed, cross at having stepped into his net.

"Have you had a classical education?" he asked me.

"If you are going to tell me the whole story of Alcestis over again, I——"

"Oh, not at all!" he said, in an alarmed voice. "I thought you seemed excellently well up in it. I was merely going to enquire if you knew the meaning of ceteris paribus."

I signified that I did.

"Well, then, ceteris paribus, it resolves itself

into the question of whether you prefer your father's society to mine—either involving you in acquaintance with Hades."

- "Ye-es," I responded doubtfully.
- "I have been thinking it over, you see. I have a great many unmarried lady friends."
 - "Indeed," I said coldly.
- "Yes. It is plain to any observer—though they, themselves, would deny the accusation indignantly—that they repeatedly suffer the torments of—er, Hades, for their fathers and brothers and cousins and uncles."
 - "I do not see how."
- "Well, take the case of a country vicar with a son and a daughter. The family resources are meagre, but they are taxed to the uttermost in order to provide Tom with the education suitable to a gentleman, and that will equip him to claim his rank in the world. Mary remains at home in the dull vicarage, surrounded by gooseberry bushes. When Tom returns from Eton, or Harrow, or Rugby, Mary darns his stockings, and worships him. When Tom goes to Oxford, Mary economises in the family commissariat, and denies herself in every way, in order that the thing may be. She is greatly impressed by her privileges when she is once taken for a four-days' visit to Oxford during the Eights Week, and has tea on her brother's

college barge. When Tom gets a curacy, Mary goes and keeps house for him, in order, by thrift and management, to make his little income suffice. When Tom gets a living, he marries; and Mary, now grown pitifully shabby and timid, returns to the parental vicarage and the gooseberry bushes. In this case, then, the sister has clearly and undeniably endured-er -Hades for his sake, and sacrificed her life for his, as much as your Alcestis friend ever did. Nor will it occur to Tom, throughout his life, that he has fed the pride and strength of his manhood on the sap of his sister's happiness and youth; and when he has risen to the head of his profession, and counts himself a prosperous and successful man, he will not feel that he owes all this to the gentle maiden lady whose colourless existence he now kindly helps to support."

"Oh, I agree with you!" I cried. "I know of so many cases like that!"

"And there are many other minor occasions," he continued, "in which sisters suffer—er— Hades for their brothers, and mothers for their sons, and daughters for their parents. When there is a sudden illness in a family—who is called on to give up occupations and engagements at a moment's notice, and retire behind sheets that have been wrung out in carbolic

acid?—the mother, the sister, the daughter, or the aunt! Who goes away to golf, or to fish; or, if obliged to remain in town, who lives at his club, and grumbles on the state of affairs, and considers himself personally ill-used?—the father, the brother, the son, or the uncle! Who is expected, by divine right, to know how to deal gently but firmly with the peevish patient; and who accompanies the convalescent to the undesirable seaside?—the mother, the sister, the daughter, or the aunt! Who comes in once a day to ask, 'How are you this morning?' and then hurries away to his avocations and pleasures?—the father, the brother, the son, or the uncle! On this occasion, then, the mother, sister, daughter, or aunt, clearly and undeniably suffers—er—Hades."

"Well, but men are so in the way in a sick-room!"

"Oh, if it comes to that, Admetus would probably have said men were so in the way in Hades. Or take—oh! there are so many times when sisters, and aunts, and daughters suffer martyrdom!"

"Well, granted! But how does this affect me?"

"It crushes your argument. If you don't approve of woman's subjection, you mustn't only not marry, you must leave father and brother and cousin and uncle, and, by leaving them, leave a great many other things besides, and live by yourself and for yourself. Wouldn't you rather marry me?"

- "Well, it seems that I gain nothing."
- "You gain certain privileges which society confers on a married lady."
- "Nous avons change tout cela!" I cried. "What intrinsic value has the feeble Mr Noodle, with his receding chin and his two songs and his five ideas, that I should give precedence to a young woman, just because she has consented to be his wife? Or is the social status to be conferred by way of compensation? If so, poor girl, she may sweep her bridal fineries out before me and welcome."
- "But suppose it were not Mr Noodle, but some one who could not sing, and had six ideas?"
- "It does not alter the case. A woman, I consider, by assenting to the obsolete doctrine that matrimony dignifies her, is paying a barbaric compliment to man."
- "Will you pay me the barbaric compliment of marrying me?"
 - "No, I won't."
 - "Do you dislike me personally?"
- "I shall soon. I never heard of any one proposing in such an argumentative manner before!"

"But you met my proposal by logic, and I have logically proved you to be in the wrong."

I battled for a little while, but his proposition seemed plausible; and so, as I pride myself on being strictly just, I promised to reflect on it, and he went away, saying he would come tomorrow to learn the result of my reflections.

When he came next day, I told him that I agreed with him: I was acting the part of Alcestis; I would do so no more. As long as a woman pandered to the selfishness of her male relatives—be they fathers, brothers, husbands, cousins, or uncles,—as long as she consented to receive anything at their hands, and so put herself into the position of being required to give in return, they required it of her that she should daily give her life for theirs. It was injustice to woman in the abstract to yield to such a state of matters. I would yield no longer.

"You will then be just to one poor fellow in the concrete?" he cried.

"I shall go into lodgings," I replied.

His face fell suddenly.

"May, you are joking!" he exclaimed.

I assured him that I was not joking. I had suddenly realised that I was a slave.

He looked round the drawing-room. It is

a very pretty room, full of old carved wood and soft colours, and the scent of many flowers.

"Do you call this slavery?" he asked, with a dramatic gesture.

"It requires cleaning annually," I replied.

"Your father is very kind and indulgent to you, is he not?"

"I have no doubt that Admetus was kind and indulgent to Alcestis in everything except essentials."

"Oh, may Alcestis go to everlasting per-"

"It is exactly what she did do."

"No; Hercules went and brought her back."
He had evidently been reading it up. I felt snubbed.

He protested till the dressing-gong sounded; but I remained as firm as a rock.

"May," said my father at dinner that evening, "that young Despard seems to call here pretty often. This is the third day running, isn't it?"

"Yes, papa; but he won't ever come here again."

"Why not?" asked my father, looking up at me keenly.

"Because I am going away."

"Going away? Where?"

"I am going into lod—lodgings!" I cried, bursting into tears.

"My little May, what is it?" he asked, coming round to me at once.

"Oh, you are so—so very kind to me, papa!—and—and I'm sure you don't mean it! But you s—s—send me down into Hades for you!"

"My dear child, what strong language! What do you mean?"

I dried my eyes, and told him all about Alcestis.

He did not take it nearly so well as Captain Despard had done. He was very angry, and talked about "rank folly," and "modern notions derived from reading idiotic novels." I pointed out that the notions were derived from an intelligent comprehension of ancient classical mythology, and he told me to go to bed. I went, though it was not yet ten o'clock, feeling excessively miserable, but with my mind now firmly made up. What more is needed, save one touch of martyrdom, to make a woman feel sure she is in the right?

CHAPTER II

NEXT day I went out and looked at various lodgings. Those I liked best were in a quiet little street near to the Marble Arch. It was

called Old Quaint Street, and the woman who let the rooms had lost money, and cried very much when she told me about it; and the white curtains were stiff and smoky and grimy, and the passage smelt of cookery; but what were all these minor details when weighed against a principle?

I did not quite like to actually engage the rooms. Some of the timid dependence on other people's sanction still clung to me. I said I would let her know.

When I returned home I found that Captain Despard had called during my absence, and had had a long interview with my father. I do not know what they had said; but when I came home father met me quite cheerfully, and even looked a little amused.

"Well, May," he said, "have you found comfortable quarters?"

"Not luxurious," I admitted, "because, you see, I have only a hundred a year of my own, and I shall really require it all for my dress; and so that leaves very little over."

"It does indeed," father agreed; "next to none, I should say. And are you not going any longer to honour me by drawing your allowance?"

There was a touch of laughter in my father's voice that stiffened me into instant dignity.

"I have some sense of rectitude," I said.
"I shall live entirely on what is strictly my own. Please don't think I blame you, papa, or feel that you have ever been consciously unkind to me. On the contrary I see, looking back, that, according to your lights, you have been a most indulgent parent."

"Thank you, my dear," said my father meekly, "and may I come and see you in your lodgings?"

"Oh, yes, papa!"

- "And I shall be able to bring you news of the world you will have left behind."
 - "Left behind?"
- "Yes—of all your friends, and of what is going on."

I looked puzzled.

- "Because you may feel yourself a little shut out, you see," continued father.
 - "Oh, I don't think so!" I replied cheerfully.
- "Well, you don't anticipate being able to entertain much, do you?" asked father, smiling.
- "No, of course not!" said I, with a mental picture of my parlour in Old Quaint Street still vividly before my eyes.
- "And you can hardly go to all your parties, my dear, and return alone to your lodgings."
- "Oh—no," I assented doubtfully, with another mental vision of a beautiful new ball-

dress that had been sent home only yester-day.

"You have thought of all this?" asked father.

"I had not quite realised it," I answered honestly.

"I fancy you have not realised many things yet, my child," said father.

"Oh, I did not expect to have nothing to give up!" I responded cheerfully. "A pioneer does not tread on rose leaves! Do you suppose I shall miss all my engagements more than I shall miss you, daddie?"

"I know that I shall miss my little daughter!"
I felt my lips quivering, but I managed to ask: "What shall you do, papa?—I mean who will——"

"Oh, I shall ask your Aunt Jane to come and look after me while you are away."

Now, my Aunt Jane I thoroughly detest. I know it is wrong; but I can't help it. She does interfere so! Ever since I came home from school, five years ago, it has been a continual struggle to show her that I prefer to manage things in my own way, and consider myself capable of doing so unaided. Many is the tussle I have had with her, and she usually has had to retire discomfited, with a sniff and a muttered allusion to her young days. And

now to think that *she* would come and be mistress in my house, and order my servants, and—— Oh! this was the last straw. But I made up my mind to endure it. One can endure anything for the sake of a principle.

I went to my lodgings at the end of that I will draw a veil over my parting with my home. I went round and looked at all the dear rooms, and at the books in the library, and at each of my beloved things. went last into my own little boudoir with its pink hangings, and unlocked my box treasures, and burned a quantity of old letters. It struck me as curiously like what Alcestis had done. I remembered that she had gone round her house and said good-bye to every thing. I think at the last moment I would have given it up but for the remembrance of that quizzical look of father's, and of what Captain Despard would say. I nerved myself with thoughts of this. I had a farewell interview with my old nurse, Tabby. She has been with us ever since I can remember. She was strangely unfeeling.

"I'm sorry indeed that you've quarrelled with your pa about the young captain, Miss May. Pas is arbitrary; but just you keep true, missie, and he'll come round, as sure as they does in the play."

So that was the version in the servants' hall!

Well, I could not explain, so I let it be. It was perhaps unjust to father.

I got into my cab and drove away. I took twelve boxes and cases in all, besides several little pieces of furniture and pictures, and odds and ends. My biggest dress box would not go in at the door, and had to be unpacked out in the street, and sent back empty. I could so easily have got into it and been taken safely home again!

It took me several days to unpack and then repack-because there was not room for anything. Then I "did up" my sitting-room, and put my books and pictures about, and filled the vases with cut flowers, and made the place look -well, better. But it was lonely in the evenings! I went out in the afternoons and paid several calls on several bosom-friends. explained to them about Alcestis, and how wrong it was for women to submit as they did. They all laughed at me, and I was glad to be able to prove to them that I was in earnest by telling them about the lodgings. That made them open their eyes; but they were more concerned with their own affairs than with mine, and soon ran on with their chatter. How trivial it all was! the flower-show-the so-and-so's dance-Meta's engagement. I sat and listened. A week ago I should have joined in readily enough. A week ago I was certainly intending to fulfil every one of the engagements they were discussing—except, of course, the matrimonial ones. How interested they all seemed in matrimony!—as if marriage were the most important thing in the world, except dress. I went home feeling rather "out of it," as father had expressed it.

Then came a spell of wet weather, and I spent my days at the window watching the street below, and the tops of the umbrellas of the passers-by, and listening to the continual whirr of the machine of the little dressmaker who lived above me, and to the strumming of the poor girl who lived downstairs with her widowed mother, and gave music lessons. These days were decidedly dull and conducive to pessimism; but I learnt to talk to myself a good deal. "In order to carry out your high ideals," I said sternly, "you have to learn to forego frivolous society and the pleasures that have hitherto proved sufficient for you. So be it. Life contains other pleasures—higher ones. You must seek these."

So I went to Mudie's, and came home laden with recent novels.

Father appeared one evening. He explained that Aunt Jane was very conscientious, but not a stimulating companion; and so he had

walked over to see how I was getting on. He smoked a cigar, at my request, and he talked a good deal about Britain's attitude towards the opium question; but he gave me no account of all Aunt Jane must have been doing in the house, and he never even mentioned Captain Despard's name.

When he got up to go, he looked round my room as if he had suddenly seen it for the first time.

"So this is where you live?" he asked.

"Yes," I said.

He shrugged his shoulders and kissed me.

I ceased to pay calls. What was the use of going and listening to people whose lives were so different from my life? I even stopped attending our usual church; it would look so weak to sit in the family pew. I went on visiting my district, though. The poor have such simple ways of looking at things. It never occurs to them to question existing facts. The great problems of life that confront us do not seem to trouble them. There was one poor woman in my district whose husband was out of work, and the way that woman sobbed when she told me of how he came home to her, night after night, footsore and disheartened, after having tramped miles in answer to some advertisement, only to find that some other applicant had been chosen. I saw the husband once. He looked a nice, well-built, honest lad. The wife tried to seem cheerful when he came in, and poked up the little bit of fire, and began to spread out some wretched apology for a meal. I went away and drove round to every one I could think of, including the Charity Organisation, to ask for work for that man. But the courtesy of this century cannot stand the strain if you interfere either in business matters or with sport; and I got no help for him. Finally, I went to my father's chambers.

"Tut, tut!" he said. "Why should you be undertaking this man's taste of Hades for him?"

"Oh, yes, of course, the whole system is wrong!" I cried. "But, meanwhile, these people are unhappy! Think of the poor wife, father! She says he has always been so kind, and worked so hard for her, and now she is afraid his courage will break down. And she is ill herself."

"No doubt. She should have been as sensible as you, my dear, and declined the part of Alcestis."

I went away dejected. But that evening I got a note from father: "Have sent a clerk round to see your protegés, and find it all as you say. Have given him work and sixteen shillings a week. Will you reward me by

coming to the theatre to-morrow night? Or do you regard the Haymarket as a form of Hades?"

Dear father! How good he was! And what a treat the theatre would be! And how happy that poor little wife would feel by now! I ran upstairs to shake out one of my crushed evening dresses that I had not worn for so long, and I laid out my opera-cloak and fan and gloves, and felt quite light-hearted.

Father fetched me. The play had begun When we were sitting in when we arrived. our box father handed me his opera-glasses. The very first thing I saw, before I raised the glasses to my eyes, was Captain Despard sitting with a group of people in the stalls. I hastily levelled my glasses to the stage, and became absorbed in the play. Captain Despard did not look once in my direction; he seemed engrossed in conversation with the lady next him. There were two of his fellow-officers with him, and an elderly man, and three ladies. Captain Despard talked mostly to a dark-haired girl on his right, who was quite pretty. He put on her cloak for her when they came away. I caught sight of them all in the hall as we came out, but Jack was rushing about trying to get some one's carriage, and did not see us. We had to wait quite a long time for ours.

"Well, did you enjoy it?" father asked. And I told him it had been delightful.

Father left me at my door. How cold and squalid my little room looked when I got back! And that fire was out again! I wondered if Jack had gone to supper anywhere with them.

The following day an irresistible desire came over me to see my own dear home once more. It was now almost two months since I had left it. Two months!—two whole months of living by myself and for myself. How miserably lonely old age must be to one who has not managed to form ties in youth—ties that neither fading beauty nor flagging spirits and failing health will loosen. Yes, love is what we ought to earn and to hoard in youth; it is better provision for old age than is any balance at the banker's. I would go and see Aunt Jane—poor Aunt Jane! Perhaps I had wronged her. She had not much to live for; it was exceedingly natural that she should be disagreeable.

How familiar it all looked when James flung open the front door! The rush of warm air from the spacious hall, the big doors with their carved wooden handles, the soft carpet on the broad, shallow staircase—how familiar it all was!—and yet how strange. I felt as if I had been away a lifetime. And now I was in the dear old drawing-room again, with the screens

and pictures, and the piano, and the easy chairs, and the blazing fire, and—and all my flower-vases empty! Not a flower in the room!

Aunt Jane received me with her customary duplex kiss.

"I am glad you have come, though you have been a long time making up your mind to do it. However, I can well understand your reluctance."

"Now, don't scold me, Aunt Jane."

"Well, in my opinion, it is just a good scolding you want. But as I have promised—I mean, well—let us change the subject."

But I was too occupied in covertly looking round at everything to heed what she said. There were but few changes—little things I could easily alter—but of course they would never be altered.

Aunt Jane gave me some tea. She was using the wrong set—the little Dresden one that I thought too small for comfort.

Then some other callers came—friends of Aunt Jane's—and seemed to take her position quite for granted, and hardly noticed me. I went away soon after, and was sorry I had gone at all.

When I reached my lodgings that fire was out again, and the place looked horrid. I felt too tired and depressed even to ring and have the fire re-lit. The bell would summon only

Alice, with smudged face and cap askew. Still, it was stupid of me to sit down and cry; and it was more stupid of me, after I had cried for one hour by the clock, to bathe my eyes and go for a walk in the gathering dusk, in order to let the cool air cure my headache. Did all reformers feel as wretched as I felt that afternoon? I hurried along one of the broad walks of the Park, with the lights of Park Lane dancing behind its railings, and felt that I could not go back to that wretched, hateful little room. I bought some flowers from a woman who was standing with a basket at a street corner. You can always have a touch of mystic refinement when you can possess flowers. The woman had a baby in her arms, and a child clinging to her skirt.

"Are they both yours?" I asked involuntarily. She seemed little more than a girl.

"This one is, miss," she answered, smiling down at the sticky infant in the shawl; "but that"—glancing coldly at the little shivering child—"is a neighbour's. She left it."

I put some money into the little child's cold hand, and she looked up at me with big, wondering, grieved eyes.

[&]quot; Left it?"

[&]quot;Some ladies got her a place, and she pays me to keep it."

I hurried on to a distant corner of the Park. It was now raining fast, and the path was deserted. I did not put up my umbrella, for I had forgotten it. I did not mind getting wet. I did not mind catching cold. There was no one who would care. I sat down on a seat under a tree, and watched the rain gathering into little pools at my feet.

Some one emerged out of the mist and walked slowly past me, and then suddenly stopped, turned, and came quickly back. I glanced up—it was Jack Despard.

"May!" he exclaimed; and I knew in a moment that it was all right.

Jack had a big umbrella, and he sat down by me and held it over us both.

"What is the matter, darling?" he said.

"Nothing," I answered, turning my face away; "it is the rain." And then, because I was nervous, I said the one thing I did not mean to say. "I saw you at the theatre last night."

"Yes; and I saw you."

"Did you? I thought you didn't."

"You never looked at me."

Well, that was fair; and after a moment we both laughed.

"Do you know it is eight weeks and four days since we met?" he asked.

"Really?" I answered airily.

"And how long is it to be till we meet again?"

I did not answer, but I felt his hand take mine, and I left it.

"Is it to go on like this?" he asked.

Still I did not answer.

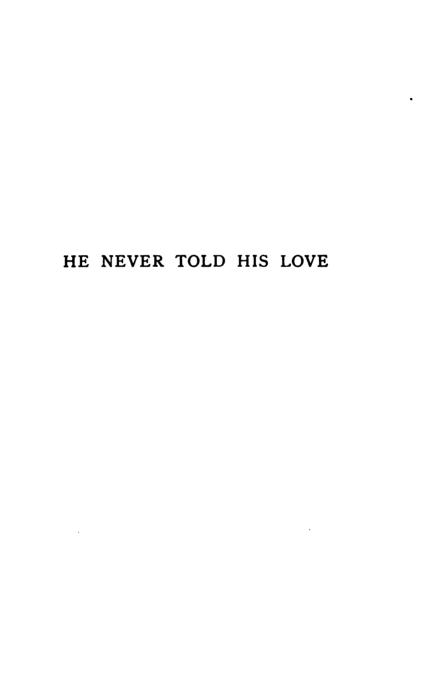
"Is it to go on like this?" he repeated.

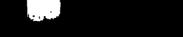
"No, dear," I murmured.

I don't know what made me say "dear," but it sounded quite natural at the moment. Only—I did not quite foresee the immediate consequences.

"Perhaps Alcestis liked going there for him," I whispered presently.

"But he was a brute to let her!" answered Jack.





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HE NEVER TOLD HIS LOVE

CHAPTER I

"YOU know, Hubert, we ought to tell them; it was wrong from the first—wrong to them, and wrong to ourselves too," and pretty Mrs Stanhope drew her straight pencilled eyebrows together, and bent her head over her work. Hubert was sitting opposite, with the air of a man at his ease in his own home. He blew one or two more rings of smoke into the air, and then lightly knocked the ash off the tip of his cigar before replying.

"I don't know," he then observed calmly.

His wife, who had been awaiting his answer with well-concealed anxiety, felt exasperated.

"You are enough to drive me wild, Hubert!" she cried. "You are so slow, and take every-

thing so coolly! If your parents are as easygoing as you are, it won't be difficult to reconcile them to your marriage. Though, I must say," she went on, stitching vigorously, "that if I were they, I should feel it hard to forgive an only son going away to America and marrying there, and never telling them! It really is inexcusable!"

"Yet you agreed to it at the time," said Hubert, surveying his bride with lazyadmiration.

"Now, I think that's too bad of you, Hubert! To go and make my good-nature into a reproach! I agreed at the time, because you said you'd take me straight back to Europe, and your father would forgive you at once if it were irrevocable, and-and-when he saw me—at least, that's what you said! And then you went on delaying and putting off on one excuse or another, or none at all, and here we've been four months married, and not a thing done! And now your parents are writing and asking you when you are coming home, and what do you intend to do? You can't go on living here without giving any explanation. And, besides, I think it's unkind of you-it's not as if you were proud of me one bit!" and a big tear fell down on her work.

Hubert looked repentant.

"I'm very proud of you," he said decidedly.

"I long to show you to them. But I was afraid at the time, the governor has such old-world prejudices, and now it is so much more difficult."

"It just needs a little decision and courage!" said his wife energetically.

"And that is just what I haven't got," responded her husband dolefully.

"I've a good mind to go over by myself, and say, 'Look here, Colonel Stanhope, I'm Esther Green, and my father was a tinsmith who emigrated because he couldn't earn enough money to keep his wife and child at home. But he made a quantity of money out here, and had me educated like a lady. And, what is more, I'm married to your son Hubert, and, consequently, I'm your daughter-in-law; and I'm sorry we didn't tell you at the first; but both my parents are dead, and I had nobody to advise me; and I ought to have known better, but I'm only nineteen.'"

"Good heavens! How the governor would storm!" said Hubert, laughing.

"He wouldn't storm at me if he's a gentleman!" said Esther, lifting her little head defiantly.

"Oh, he wouldn't storm at you, he'd treat you with deferential courtesy; but he'd give me a jolly good blowing up for not telling him."

- "Well, I think you deserve it."
- "And he'd probably never speak to me again."
- "Then he's an unnatural old bear!—But I don't think you're right,—I think you imagine all that. From all you've told me, he seems to me to be awfully kind and nice, and never to have been really hard on you all your life."
- "It's quite true, that. He's frightfully strict, and has all sorts of ideas of his own, but he's been very good to me, poor old dad!—and the mother too! I believe I'll write to-night."
 - "Do!" said his wife, with a gleam of hope.
- "It's jolly hard, too," he added. His wife's face fell again.
- "It would be so much easier to tell them than to write it," he remarked reflectively, after a pause.
- "Well, shall we go over and see them, and tell it all when we're there?"

Hubert slowly lit another cigar.

- "Mother would be sure to come down to see me land, and then how could I explain all my luggage, and—you?"
- "I could pretend to be some one else, and go to a hotel for a day or two, till you had confessed it all," she answered despondently.
- "But all the ship's passengers would know. We'd have to keep it up all the voyage."

"It's the old story of one lie begetting others."
Hubert reddened and fidgeted. "I don't think I've told any lies," he said.

"Not in so many words, but every letter you write is a lie in spirit."

"You're as bad as father, you little moralist! That's just like one of his speeches."

"Well, see how nicely we'd got on then!—if only you would have the courtesy to introduce us."

"I believe you would. No one could help getting on with you. I believe you'd win the old gentleman, body and soul! I say, Essie, what do you say to this? Supposing I go over by myself—they are always writing and urging me to come back-I could just wire that I'm coming. As soon as I reached home I could write to you and tell you how they take the news, and if it were all right you could pack up and start at once by the next steamer; but if it were not, then I'd return, and we'd settle out here. It would be far more dignified for you to wait -not come all the way over without being sure of your welcome, and perhaps have to go ignominiously back again! And I could be so much more eloquent when once I were there in the old place; and, of course, I'd take your photograph, and all that."

"I think it's a perfectly splendid idea, and

I think you're the dearest, cleverest old Hubert in the world!—and I shall pack up your things right away, and you shall go and take your passage to-morrow."

"You seem precious glad to be rid of me!" said her husband, laughing; but he kissed her eager little face, and then lazily opened the door for her.

CHAPTER II

MRS STANHOPE was sauntering about her drawing-room, picking the faded leaves off the plants, and re-arranging the photographs that stood about in stands. She had that morning seen her husband off to England, and after the hurry and bustle of the sudden packing and departure, was feeling the reaction of having nothing to do, and of being by herself.

Presently the door was flung open, but Esther did not turn round from the music she was arranging. She thought it was the tea, and was startled when the maid announced—

" Mrs Ordway!"

Esther turned slowly round with a puzzled, incredulous air, which quickly gave way to one of amazed delight, as, with the one word,

"Hope!" she ran to the tall, slender girl in black, who was coming swiftly to her with outstretched hands.

Hope Ordway and Esther Stanhope had been fast friends all the years they were at school together, in spite of the four years of difference in their ages. When Hope had left school Esther was only fourteen; but they had met constantly till Hope's marriage two years later, at which Esther was chief bride's-maid. Hope's marriage was not a very happy one, and when she was left a widow a year after—young, rich, and independent—no one had considered her very greatly to be pitied. Since her widowhood she had been travelling about in America, and for some time Esther had not heard from her.

"Why, Esther!" exclaimed Hope Ordway, when at last they had sunk on a sofa together, "I haven't seen your dear little face for a whole long year! and you've gone and married in the meantime, and never told me anything about it till it was all over. And I thought I should have the greatest difficulty in finding you, so I came straight here to see if I could discover where you had gone; but I see you've not left your own house. And you're not a bit altered, you're as pretty as ever! And where's your husband, dear?" And Mrs Ordway

glanced about among the sofas and easy chairs, as if she expected to see him lying about somewhere.

"Oh, Hope, I'm so glad to have you again! It seems such ages, dear, doesn't it? It's because such an amount has happened. Yes, we have just stayed in my house—oh, our plans are so unsettled, you see—we shall probably be going to Europe—it was best. And I'm so glad you came in just now, I was feeling so lonely. Oh—my husband? he's this morning gone to England!"

"To England!—and left you by yourself?"

"Oh, he's gone to see his people, you know."

Mrs Ordway looked at her friend curiously, and a question rose to her lips, but remained unspoken. Esther was playing nervously with the soft silk of her dress.

- "Where do your husband's people live, dear?" asked Hope, to break the awkward silence.
 - "In London."
- "I start for London on Wednesday—this day week. I'm going straight to London for the summer, and then up the Rhine to Switzerland, and back to Paris for the early autumn. Shall I meet your husband in London?"
- "Going to London this day week? Oh, Hope! Why, of course, you'll see Hubert.

I'll write to him, and he'll call on you. And you must stay with me for the week till you start, Hope!"

"Yes, willingly. But I shall be in London as soon as the mail will, perhaps. You'd better give me his address, and I'll write to him."

There was a moment's hesitation in Esther's manner, and meanwhile the door opened, and the servant brought in the tea-tray, and pushed the little folding table up to Esther's side, and arranged the things on it. When he had shut the door behind him, Esther turned impulsively to her friend, and took both her hands in hers.

"I've half a mind to tell you all about it!" she exclaimed.

"Better, dear," said Hope encouragingly.

They made a pretty picture as they sat side by side on the sofa—little Esther, with curly dark hair, and bright wide-opened eyes, and red lips—vivacious, energetic, and quick in every movement, every glance, and every turn of her pretty head; Hope Ordway, taller, more sedate, in her widow's weeds, her pale, pure face and large grey eyes turned to her friend sympathetically while she spoke.

"Hope, do you know, his parents never knew of our marriage! They are very proud people, and think so much of family, and all that. They would have thought it quite beneath their son;

they wouldn't have cared a bit about my money or anything in the face of the one insuperable objection of the poor dear old daddy having been—well, you know, dear. Of course you'll say I oughtn't to have consented to secrecy. And that is quite true, and I can't forgive myself; but we were to tell them at once, and I—I yielded. I was all alone, you know."

"But, Esther, dear, do they still not know?" "That's just it, Hope. That has been my one sorrow since we married. He thinks so much of his parents, and I believe he knows that they will be angrier than I ever supposed -and somehow we have delayed from day to day, and always put off the evil hour. I know you will think it weak, but it is not that; he is the dearest fellow in the world, Hope, and I long for you to see him. He is so good to me! He treats me like a queen! But I think he feels that it will be a terrible storm when it comes, and that it will mean a family quarrel, perhaps, and that I should be made unhappy by feeling myself the cause of it—and he is so sweet-tempered and peaceable, and hates rows of any kind, and he dreads this. He is very fond of his parents—he is their only child. They had another, a little girl, but she died when she was a child. He is only twenty-two."

"And why is he gone now, Essie?"

- "To tell them."
- "Why didn't you go too?"
- "Oh, well, it will be so much easier for him to tell without me; and if they be obdurate, it would be so disagreeable for me."
- "Yes, I see. But it's a pity they can't see you, childie. I think that would go a long way towards reconciling them. You see, if he can only tell them about you, they will put everything he says down to his blind fondness of you, and imagine you are really—well——"

"A howling cad," put in Esther calmly.

Her friend laughed. "Something of that sort," she admitted. "Whereas, if they could really see you, and get to know you, dear! What a pity they couldn't meet you before being told, and take a great fancy to you!"

- "Well, Hubert and I discussed the possibility of my going over with him and then staying at an hotel, but of course that wasn't practicable; and then, besides, they wouldn't meet me until they knew."
 - "Esther!"
 - " Well?"
 - "Come over with me."

For a moment the two gazed at each other speechlessly, each busily thinking. Then Hope spoke.

"You could come over and stay with me as

my friend. If the parents are all nice about it, then you are there all right to receive their blessings. If you find that Mr Stanhope hasn't succeeded, and that there is a deadly quarrel, then we can do a stroke of diplomacy on our own account. We can get to know the Stanhopes somehow, and you can set to work to win their proud old hearts, which no one is better fitted to do, till they say reproachfully to their wicked son—'Ah, if you hadn't thrown yourself away, you might perhaps have won that sweet girl for your bride! That is the kind of girl we should have welcomed as a daughter-in-law.' Then he will bow, and say: 'She is your daughter-in-law.' Comprends-tu, ma chérie?"

"Oh, Hope! Anyway, it could do no harm, my coming *incognito*, and no one need know, except Hubert, and so if it had gone wrong, we could just return together, poor boy."

"We could send for him at once, when we arrived," said Hope. "Fancy, what a surprise for him! And then how nice for me to have you with me instead of being all alone! It will be like old times again. I was just thinking it would be miserably lonely for me in London."

"But you must know people there, dear?"

"Yes," said Hope, "a few. I have one old friend in London. You never met him. He is an Englishman, but spent six months in

America four years ago, just before my marriage, and I saw a good deal of him then. His name," she added diffidently, "is Stephenson—Ralph Stephenson."

"Why, how extraordinary! Ralph Stephenson, the artist? Why, he is Hubert's oldest friend! I've often and often heard about him. His name is as familiar to me as can be!"

"Then there's our introduction to the Stanhopes, dear! For I've written to him that I'm coming, and he said he would meet me at the docks, and help with the luggage and the hotel, and all that, as I was alone. Why, it all fits in nicely, Esther! We must write at once about your berth. Have you any one you can leave the house in charge of?"

"Oh yes, Mrs Lane. She is more in charge here than I am already."

"Mrs Lane?—your old nurse? I remember her. Have you her still?"

"I've never not had her. She has taken care of me since mother died, seven years ago, and as I grew up she developed into house-keeper. I don't know how I should manage without her. She still takes charge of me, and of the house too."

"Well, then, that is all right. You needn't take a maid, as I am taking one, and she can do for us both. And now, dear, are you going

to give me any tea? It has been up such a long time."

CHAPTER III

THE huge vessel was slowly tugged up the harbour, the deck crowded with excited passengers, eagerly trying to catch a glimpse of the faces along the edge of the quay. Hand-kerchiefs were waved, and confused cries of recognition sounded on all sides. "There he is, mother!—Look, there's John!—and Mary!"—or "Henry, is that father there, behind that sailor? Look quickly—I can't see!"

There was weeping, and laughing, and shouting of the sailors, and hurrying to and fro, and in the midst of it all Hope and Esther stood, linked arm in arm, and feeling a little sad at having no joyous family welcome awaiting them, and keeping in the background, in order that the more fortunate ones might have the first glimpse of the people on shore. Gradually the press around them drew them to the front, and Hope put her hand on the rail to steady herself, and scanned the crowd. At that moment a woman at Esther's side suddenly burst into tears. She had caught sight of

some loved face that was hers among the throng. At the other side of Hope a man with a red face was swearing badly as he tried to push his way through with a bag in his hand. Esther slipt her hand through Hope's arm to keep them together, and felt it trembling.

"Look, there he is, Essie," she said.

"Who? Hubert?" cried Esther, gazing down eagerly.

"No, no, dear. How could he know? I mean Mr Stephenson—Hubert's friend, you know."

Esther looked languidly down, and descried a tall man a head above the crowd around him. He was looking straight up at them, his face lit with welcome. But now the rush towards the gangways began, and Hope and Esther were carried with it on to the quay, and the next moment were being hurried by Ralph Stephenson to the special train that was to take them to town. The carriage was very crowded, and there was not much opportunity for speaking. Hope was pale and silent, and lay back in her corner, and looked out at the train window. Stephenson sat nearly opposite, and glanced alternately at her and at Esther. Esther puzzled him. He did not know who she was. for Hope had said she was coming alone with her maid. Esther herself was anxious to glean news from him about Hubert: but she was separated from the others, and so had to wait patiently as best she could. When they got to the hotel Stephenson was going to leave them, saying he would come again and call in the evening, when they were more settled. Hope, understanding Esther's eager glance. drew him into their private sitting-room, saying: "Oh, you must just come in while the men are taking up the things; you have hardly been introduced vet. I don't think I told you I was to have a friend with me, did I?" Here Hope stopped rather awkwardly, remembering that she could not, as yet, introduce Esther as "Mrs Stanhope" without immediate explanation. Stephenson, however, seemed not to notice the omission of the name, and bowed and smiled.

"Did you have a good passage, Mrs Ordway?" he asked. "A friend of mine came over last week, and they had had a very rough passage. I have been quite anxious about you! By the way, it's curious, isn't it, that my two greatest friends should have come over from America within a week?"

"Who is your other American friend?" asked Hope carelessly, as she drew off her gloves and glanced at herself in the mirror over

the hotel mantelpiece. Esther was standing with her back turned, looking out of the window.

"Well, he's not an American. It's young Hubert Stanhope, an Englishman, and he went to America last year. He went merely for a visit, but he's stayed a most unconscionable time. However, he's home now, and so are you!"

"Is he home for good, then?"

"Oh, yes. He only went there to see the place, you know, not with any idea of settling down. Oh, he's not the sort of fellow to settle away from home. He's the Stanhopes' only son, and will come in for immense estates, that have been in the Stanhope family since Noah. I fancy, now he's done a little roving, he'll marry and settle down here."

"I suppose you've seen a good deal of him since he returned?" said Hope hastily.

"Yes," replied Ralph, inwardly wondering at the many questions regarding his friend, but liking to consider them as prompted by interest in all that belonged to him. "Oh, yes. He has been my greatest chum for years. The old people are delighted at getting him back. I was dining there last night, and they were discussing his future projects."

There was a rustle at the window, and both

turned towards Esther, whom Ralph had, till now, forgotten.

"You must be very tired after the voyage?" he said.

Esther turned round slowly. Her face was very white, and her eyes appeared to see nothing. Hope and Stephenson both started towards her, but she waved them aside.

"Oh, it's nothing!" she assured them, smiling bravely, "only that I'm tired."

"I'm so sorry! I oughtn't to have stayed. How awfully inconsiderate of me! Good-bye, Mrs Ordway! I'll come back in the evening. I do hope she'll be better!"

"He has never told," said Esther, when they were left alone, holding on to the arms of her chair, and gazing at Hope with big, frightened eyes.

"Evidently not, dear," said Hope calmly. "Didn't I find out about it neatly? Isn't it a good thing we didn't betray your name? Now, we're perfectly free to act."

"To act?" repeated Esther faintly. All her courage and energy seemed, for the moment, to have forsaken her.

"Yes, of course, to act. To tell you the truth, I half fancied it might be so. You see, if he didn't like telling when he was away from them, and with you by him to persuade him,

why should he have such superior courage when he was left entirely to himself, and in the very difficult position of being with his parents, and being made so much of by them?—and they, I daresay, by their behaviour, unconsciously making a confession frightfully impossible. Poor fellow!"

"You don't—you don't think badly of him for it, Hope?" asked Esther wistfully.

"Oh, dear, no," replied Hope cheerfully. "I see just what it is; he's one of those very amiable soft men that England sometimes produces."

Esther looked up indignantly, but Hope went on before she had time to speak.

"We'll manage beautifully, Esther, for I have a perfectly lovely plan all ready; but first we must go up and change our dresses, and render ourselves respectable, and then we must have lunch, for we're not in fit condition now to settle our destinies."

CHAPTER IV

That evening Hope received Ralph Stephenson in the little hotel parlour alone. Esther, she told him, as she trailed in with outstretched

hand to greet him, was utterly done up by her journey, and had gone to bed. Ralph didn't much mind, as he took the slender little white hand in his, and looked down into the sweet, pale, upturned face.

"You're not a bit altered!" he remarked, rather inconsequently.

"Where will you sit?" she replied hurriedly, beginning to pull up an easy chair. The room had already undergone a slight change since morning. The utter bareness had been softened by some books lying on the table; a small work-box open, with the contents scattered round it; and a profusion of flowers, that made the whole room fragrant. Hope's eyes rested on these as she sat down.

"It was so good of you to send them," she said gratefully. "It was quite a welcome to us, and has made the room much more homelike. It was very thoughtful."

"Oh, it was nothing. You see, I remembered some of your American customs!" he laughed. "I have forgotten nothing American!" he added.

Hope opened and shut a large fan she held nervously. "I want you to do something for me," she said at last.

"I will do it."

"That is rather rash, isn't it?"

- "I don't care!"
- "I don't think I told you the name of my fellow-traveller to-day."
- "No, I know you didn't."

He was leaning back in his chair with an air of utter, placid content.

Hope raised her eyes from her fan, and met his glance, and her face grew serious.

- "Her name is Stanhope—Esther Stanhope," she said slowly.
- "Stanhope! Why, that's the name of the people I was telling you about this morning—my great friend, you know. Is she—is Miss Stanhope any relation of theirs, do you think?"
- "Miss Stanhope—I didn't say Miss. She is Mrs Stanhope—Mrs Hubert Stanhope."
- "Why——" exclaimed Ralph, starting up with sudden interest, and then he stopped abruptly, looking at her with questioning eyes.
- "Yes," she said softly, playing with her fan again.
- "America!" he murmured. "Of course, I see. But you don't mean to say——"
- "He married her over there, and has never had the courage to tell his parents. He came over to tell them, but, from what you said this morning, it appears he has not done so," and Hope's lip curled scornfully.
 - "The scoundrel!" muttered Stephenson.

"No—he's not that exactly, I think. I fancy he meant to tell, but is a sort of amiable, easilyled, easy-going young man, and has let things drift."

"Why, do you know him?"

"No; I can only judge from what his wife says. I don't think he can be worthless; he must have good qualities, or he couldn't have won the love of such a girl as Esther—or you for a friend," she added.

Ralph coloured with pleasure. "Do you think his being my friend is in his favour?" he asked.

Hope laughed. "Well, I am your friend," she said, "so perhaps I like to regard it as a respectable position."

"To think of his being married, and never telling me!" he exclaimed. "Well, now that I think of it, he saw me only when other people were present. Why doesn't he like to tell?" he asked suddenly. "Is she——"

"She is my dearest friend!" said Hope emphatically.

Ralph bowed. "The position is a respectable one," he said.

"But her father was a self-made man," Hope went on. "Esther was his only child; she is an orphan now. Her father was very rich when he died, but he began life as a—a tinsmith."

Ralph whistled, and then suddenly burst out laughing.

"What is it?" exclaimed Hope, with some dignity.

"I beg your pardon—I really do, indeed! But, oh, it is too funny! The parents—what a joke! They'd never recover!"

"Are they very-" began Hope anxiously.

"Oh, fearfully!" replied Ralph; "especially the father. Oh! just think of his face of horror! Poor Hubert, no wonder!"

Hope got up restlessly, and leant on the mantelpiece and looked down at the empty grate.

"What are you going to do?" Ralph asked.
"Did she come over thinking——"

"I persuaded her to come with me. He doesn't know she's here. Oh, she's such a sweet little thing, and I love her so! It's a shame! I have told you because I knew I could trust you, and I thought you would help me," and Hope's voice trembled, and the tears sprang up into her eyes.

Ralph stood up, and went to her, growing suddenly grave.

"Hope," he said, "if you love her, that's enough for me. I'll help you—I'll do anything only to hear you say again you can trust me."

"That's all right—that's so kind of you!"

said Hope, rapidly and cheerfully, drawing her hand quickly away from him. "Please sit down, and we'll plan it all."

Ralph sat down helplessly. These lightning changes of mood were puzzling to his dull masculine intellect.

An hour afterwards, when Ralph Stephenson left the hotel and walked slowly home, cigar in mouth, along the London streets, there was a strange elation in his heart. He had been given one of the most difficult tasks a man could possibly have given him to do; but he somehow felt as the knights-errant felt of old, when they rode out into the world in search of adventures, strange and tedious and fraught with danger, but which were ultimately to win for them the fair mistress of their heart, whose favour they bore in the field.

CHAPTER V

HUBERT STANHOPE sat alone in the smoking-room, moodily puffing a cigar.

"It's the most fearful quagmire I ever was in," he groaned to himself. "To think of that sweet little thing waiting over there, and here my writing to her to say I haven't been able to tell yet! Haven't been able to tell! I'd better call a spade a spade, and say I haven't had the courage to tell! I believe I'm a coward! Well, it has been so frightfully difficult—everything they say!—and so much is at stake, her happiness as well as mine. But every day makes it more difficult, and every day makes me want to have her again more! I'll go and find the governor and tell him now, this moment."

Hubert rose, threw away the end of his cigar, and went to the door. As he opened it, he knocked against a man coming in.

"Hullo, Stephenson! This you? Have you seen your Americans settled?"

"Oh, yes, they're all right. They came the day before yesterday. Never knew such energetic people as Americans when they come to Europe. They made me take them to all sorts of places yesterday—all the orthodox sights—St Paul's and Westminster Abbey and the rest of it. I felt fearfully ignorant, and had to improvise. I wanted them to come to the Academy, for I shouldn't have needed to show such ignorance there—and I have two of my own in, too. But they calmly said they preferred waiting till they knew some people before going to fashionable lounges, and would do the sights first. 'Fashionable lounges'!"

"Poor Stephenson!" laughed Hubert.
"Never mind, you can take them again soon—and send them a catalogue first, with your name marked in it. But how are they going to get to know people?"

"Oh, they have a lot of letters of introduction; why, they paid a round of calls yesterday after I left them, and then went a drive in the Park!"

"What energy!"

- "Yes; and, by the way, I was telling them about you, and that you'd just come from America, and they asked me to bring you to call. I thought we might go this afternoon, if you have nothing better to do. They're very charming."
- "Delighted. What are they exactly? Explain them."
 - "One is a widow—a young widow."
 - "Ah!"
 - "Her name is Mrs Ordway."
 - "The other?"
 - "Is a friend of hers that has come with her."
 - " Married?"
 - "No. She is a Miss Green."
- "Ah!" The name had a pleasant sound to him. It was his wife's maiden name.

At that moment the gong sounded.

"Come down and have some lunch, old man," said Hubert, getting up slowly.

"All right. And then you can come with me and see my studio—you haven't graced it with your presence since you returned; and then we'll go and call."

Hubert laughed.

- "'My heart's at the Langham, my heart is not here,' he quoted. "Which is it—the widow or the other?"
- "Do be quiet, Stanhope," said Ralph, with an effort.
- "Serious?" asked Hubert, turning round sharply, with an amused look in his eyes.

But at this moment the drawing-room door opened, and a gentle-faced elderly lady walked out, followed by a tall, thin military-looking old man. They both shook hands warmly with Ralph, and Mrs Stanhope put her little white hand, with its many diamonds, lightly into his arm, and led the way, Hubert and his father following.

The dining-room was a large, handsome, rather gloomy room. The table was laid for luncheon, and the whole atmosphere was scented with the profusion of hot-house flowers, that were arranged in tall silver vases down the centre of the table. The dark oak side-board was also laden with silver, and richly-tinted Venetian glass. Besides the table and sideboard there was not much in the room

except chairs, and two long side tables, also of dark oak. The huge mantelpiece, reaching nearly to the ceiling, was of carved oak, with the family arms in the centre. There was no fire lit in the wide brass grate, for it was summer-time, and the space was filled by large flowering shrubs, that stood on the tiles in front. A dark, rich Turkey carpet covered the floor, and the windows were draped with heavy brocaded crimson satin curtains, through which the June sun streamed in, lighting up the staring faces of the family portraits that covered the walls, catching an occasional bit of silver or scarlet geranium on the table, and finally resting on the immovable countenance of old Adams, the family butler, as he solemnly pulled his mistress's chair back for her.

"It is nice to see you dropping in again in your old way, Ralph, my boy," said Colonel Stanhope genially. "We did not see much of you while Hubert was away."

"Well, sir, I was very busy all spring with my pictures."

"Ah, I know that. Mrs Stanhope and I promise ourselves the pleasure of going and seeing them in the Academy. Two, aren't there? Are they well hung? I haven't seen you to ask you, though it is nearly a month since the Academy was opened."

"I am very sorry, sir," began Ralph penitently.

"Oh, we're not blaming you," said Mrs Stanhope gently. "The house cannot have much attraction for you when Hubert is away."

"I think you might have come to ask after us and cheer us while we were without a son," said the old Colonel testily; "but young people have no thought for their elders nowadays; they just suit themselves and their own pleasures."

"I assure you, sir," Ralph replied warmly, "if I had thought you'd have cared to see me, I'd have——"

"But we shan't see you again if we scold you now you have come," interrupted Mrs Stanhope, smiling, "and we are far too glad to see you at one side of the table, and Hubert at the other again, to complain of anything that is past. Do you know how long it is? Why, it was November when you went away, Hubert, and now it is June! Seven and a half months!"

"Ah, well, it is a good thing for a young man to see a little of the world before he settles down. Makes him less inclined to rove afterwards. And, later on, when he has formed ties, and got daily duties and responsibilities, it won't be so easy for him to go flying off over the Atlantic," said the Colonel.

- "You spent most of your time in America, didn't you?" asked Ralph.
- "No—yes. Well, I spent a month abroad first."
 - "And did you go about much in America?"
 - "Not very much."

But the Colonel asked no questions. He did not know much about travelling, and was content that his son should have enjoyed himself, drawn on his bankers regularly, and seen something of the world.

- "Did you find the Americans nice?" asked Ralph.
- "Yes, very. They are all so friendly and sociable. Didn't you find them so when you were there?"
- "Yes, indeed. Well, most of them have plenty of the wherewithal to be sociable, and they one and all like to get hold of English people to entertain."
- "Yes, I noticed that. There was Lord L—went over in the same vessel with me. He didn't know a soul in New York, and just went to knock about a little. Would you believe it, mother, he never put his foot inside an hotel all the time he was there, after the first week. He was just taken possession of, fêted, balls

given for him, dinners, picnics—he was simply handed from one entertainer to the other without time to breathe, till he got back into the vessel to return home."

"And why was that, dear? Was the young man very pleasant company?"

"He was an utter ass," replied Hubert.

"No, it's not that, Mrs Stanhope," put in Ralph. "It's because, being a democratic country, they think a tremendous amount of aristocracy. Any member of our aristocracy, if he were short of cash, could easily gain an honest livelihood out there, provided his title were high enough, by letting himself out by the night—twenty guineas for a dance, ten for a dinner, and so on."

"Oh, but none ever would!" exclaimed Mrs Stanhope, in a shocked voice.

"That was the only thing I was afraid of, when I heard Hubert had gone out there," put in the Colonel, "that he would get hold of some of their Radical ideas. But I'm thankful to say he hasn't. He's come back as he went—a true British gentleman!"

"What is your definition of a true British gentleman, sir?" asked Ralph respectfully.

"A true British gentleman, sir, is a man who fears his God, honours his sovereign, and serves his country. He is reverential to his elders and his superior officers, and he is kind and just to his dependents and inferiors. He is as gentle as a woman to the weak, but as strong as a lion, sir, against injustice, coward-liness, deceit, or wrong. Above all, sir, he is not afraid to look any man in the eyes! He tells the truth fearlessly if it were with death staring him in the face—falsehood, and coward-liness, and prevarication are things unknown to—— Hubert, you clumsy fellow! Adams, Mr Stanhope has spilt his claret."

CHAPTER VI

About five o'clock the same afternoon the two young men drove up in a hansom to the door of the hotel, and were taken upstairs to Mrs Ordway's drawing-room. The room was filled with pretty things that Mrs Ordway had brought with her, and strewn about, to make it look more home-like during her stay in town. As Stanhope followed Ralph Stephenson in, the room seemed to him to be full of people, but there were only three guests present, two ladies and one young man—some of the friends the

Americans had called on the day before, and whom they had asked to tea at this particular hour.

The conversation ceased as the two young men were announced. Mrs Ordway rustled forward to receive them, and Stanhope's first attention was taken up with her, as he bowed over her hand. Then she turned round. "I think you already know Mrs and Miss Munro, Mr Stanhope?" she said; and Hubert bowed to them, inwardly wondering how she did know. "And will you let me introduce Mr Stephenson to you?" she added, addressing both the ladies, and gently waving Ralph towards them. "Mr Munro, will you kindly ring that bell?—and now, Mr Stanhope, I want to introduce you to my friend and travelling companion, Miss Green!"

A young lady, with her back to him, leaning over the tea-table in a shadowy corner, turned and came out towards him, and Stanhope stood in the middle of the room, hat and stick in hand, smiling courteously at—his wife.

For half a moment his smile remained fixed, and then his whole face changed to an expression of utter and absolute amazement, and the two stood looking at one another. It was but a second's silence, though it left the chief actors in the drama room for many emotions.

Mrs and Miss Munro were looking towards Ralph; young Mr Munro had his back to them as he rang the bell; and by the time the second's silence was over, and Hubert opened his lips to give vent to an exclamation, Stephenson and the two ladies had turned their faces to them, and the bell had been rung, and Mr Munro was sauntering back.

"I think we have met before, Mr Stanhope, in America!" said Esther, in a sweet, clear voice, and with an engaging smile, and she put out her little hand. "I can hardly expect you to remember me. It was at a garden party I think, in N——."

Not a word came to Hubert's parched throat, nor could he move a muscle of his transfixed face. This was Esther—Esther, whom he had left four weeks ago in America! Esther, whom he had written to that morning—his own gentle, loving little wife, whom he had last seen with her eyes dim with tears at parting with him! A garden party! Of course he remembered it—it was the first time he had met her, and they had gone wandering into the shrubbery together; but he had met her often since! Met her? He had married her since! They had had four months of married life and daily companionship, and here she was holding out her hand and mocking him as

a stranger. Before he could find breath to speak, to protest, to question, she had gone on, with a little half-nervous, half-amused laugh—

"Oh, I see you do recognise me! It is very kind of you, for you must have been introduced to fifty ladies at that tennis party. It is quite natural I should remember him," she went on, with a bright glance towards Mrs Ordway, "for he was the guest of the occasion, and we were all presented to him as the latest importation from England." With the last words Esther's interest in what she was saying appeared to vanish, and her eyes wandered carelessly past Hubert and caught sight of Ralph Stephenson, and she smiled cordially, and made a step or two towards him and shook It was a most perfect piece of hands. acting.

"I suppose you had a good deal of that sort of thing—lionizing, I mean," said Mrs Ordway, going on with the conversation with Hubert. But Hubert did not hear her: his eyes followed Esther with a sort of dull, helpless pain.

"Lionizing, I mean," repeated Mrs Ordway severely. Then the force of habit and the power of good-breeding overcame even Hubert's emotions, and with a great effort he withdrew his attention from Esther, and answered Hope's remark, which he had not heard, at random.

Mrs Munro and her daughter exchanged telegraphic glances, and Mr Munro pulled his moustache, and looked lazily amused. They all three imagined the meeting to be that of two people who had tender reminiscences in common. Evidently they were of deeper import to the hero of them than to the heroine, for his emotion on meeting her unexpectedly had been unmistakable, while she had taken it quite naturally and pleasantly, and had only appeared embarrassed when his feelings had been made so evident.

"I wonder what his parents would think!" thought Mrs Munro.

"It couldn't have been only one tennis party," thought Miss Munro: and she was right.

Meanwhile Esther moved over and began talking to the lady callers, and Hubert found himself conversing with his hostess. She sustained most of the conversation, only calling on him for replies occasionally. Gradually the whirl and tumult in his head cleared, and he tried to think collectedly in the intervals in which he was not called upon to speak. His first idea was that it was all a joke—a cruel joke, certainly; but he deserved that. She meant to frighten him, and when these people

had gone away she would come to him laughing and crying, and cross both hands over his shoulders, as she always did. It must have been a sudden freak, this coming over; he was sure she had had no idea of it when he left her. Now, certainly, the climax was come, and his parents must know. He felt half angry with Esther for her decisive action, and then with a quick compunction he owned that his inertness had rendered decisive action necessary. and that she had a right to be angry with him. Perhaps she was! He glanced over at her as she sat in her pretty pale silk he knew so well, talking animatedly to Mrs Munro, and occasionally glancing up at young Mr Munro so as to include him in the conversation. Stanhope felt a sharp pain as he looked at her. He knew every little trick of her face, every little curl that lay softly on her forehead. How he loved her, this little wife of his! For she was his wife, his own, every curl of her! He had the right to take her now, and hold her. and claim her as his in the face of all these grinning, staring idiots! But could he do it? She had met him as a stranger, she had called herself by her maiden name; what if she should refuse to acknowledge the claim? Could he make a scandal? Could he put his wife in the wrong?-and-and-no one knew about it! His parents knew nothing of it! His friend, here present, knew nothing of it! How should he explain all that?

"I was not aware that you had met Miss Green—she never told me," said the voice of Mrs Ordway beside him. "But perhaps she only knew you by sight, and not by name. You met only once, I think she said?"

"Yes, only once," replied Hubert, with a choking sensation in his throat. What Esther said was law; he had no power left to contradict her. It also flashed on him with horrible certainty that if she had not told her story to this friend she was with, which she evidently had not, then indeed she must mean seriously.

"Is—is Miss Green a great friend of yours?" he asked, in a strained voice.

"Oh, yes, we are friends of a life's standing." And Hope laughed, for the die was cast, and he had accepted the situation. But the laugh seemed to Mrs Munro, who had risen to go, to be merely caused by the ingenuousness of this garden-party admirer, and she smiled sympathetically as she gave Mrs Ordway her hand.

"Then you will come to me the day after to-morrow?" she said. "You and Miss Green. I have left the card on that table. We are to see you, and the Colonel, and your dear mother, are we not?" she went on, turning to Hubert.

"We are hoping to have that pleasure," replied Hubert, bowing, though till that moment he had been unconscious of the fact.

"I should be so pleased if your friend would come too," Mrs Munro added, turning to Ralph. With the tact of a good hostess she saw that it would make the evening pleasanter for the two fair Americans if she asked Mrs Ordway's old friend too. "The day after to-morrow—a dance. Shall I send you a card?"

Ralph bowed and murmured his thanks.

"I think we must go away too, Mrs Ordway," he said, after Mrs Munro and her daughter had said good-bye.

As Hubert shook hands with his wife all his yearning for her and his consciousness of their perfect mutual understanding leapt into his face. It was impossible that she should be able to look into his eyes without confession. But she met his gaze lightly and fearlessly, and then gave her hand to Ralph with exactly the same manner and look.

Hubert felt his heart beating in great dull thuds as he followed his friend down the broad hotel staircase. Was she mad?—or was he?

CHAPTER VII

HUBERT STANHOPE never spent a more miserable time than the long hours which intervened between his eventful call on Mrs Ordway at the hotel on Wednesday afternoon and the dance on Friday evening at the Munros. Wednesday evening he was utterly without control over his excitement. He paced up and down with his hands in his pockets and his hair rumpled and his eyes wild, till his mother grew quite anxious as to his health, and pressed him to take some water gruel and go to bed; and his father grew irritable, and made various sarcastic remarks on the manners of the rising generation. Both his mother's fond solicitude and his father's ironical comments were lost on Hubert, however, who was going over with himself every possible explanation of his wife's conduct, and every impossible solution of the terrible position they were in. Should he write to her? Should he call and demand to see her? Should he take Stephenson into his confidence?—or Mrs Oraway, who was his wife's friend? No, none of these things would do. He could not write and address his letter to "Miss Green." It would make a fool of him if she were after all in fun; and if she were in earnest—well! He could not demand to see her, for that would appear so strange to Mrs Ordway that it would require explanation, and what explanation could he give except the true one? Oh, hang it all! Why had he not told long ago? And he could not tell Stephenson. Stephenson was a fool, and he believed he was in love with her himself.

All next day the mental conflict went on again with no better result. Late in the afternoon Stephenson called. He had been all day with his two American friends, sight-seeing; and they had had afternoon tea at his studio, and he had made a slight pencil sketch of the two heads. He was going with them to the theatre to-night—to dine with them at the hotel first-and was so sorry he had been able to get only three seats, or he, Stanhope, might have come too. Hubert chafed. What right had this fellow to be taking his wife to the theatre, and sketching her head! heavens!-it was really too much! Well, he should see her at the dance to-morrow night, and then nothing should prevent a complete explanation and understanding between them.

"Well, I must be off," said Stephenson, looking at his watch. "I've got to dress."

Stanhope saw him gruffly to the door, but

Stephenson did not seem even to notice his uncivil mood. The fellow was so confoundedly happy!

Hubert was left in a worse plight than before. He was jealous, and he was powerless.

The next day dragged slowly away. He dined alone, for the Colonel and Mrs Stanhope were dining out, and were to go on to Mrs Munro's reception; and Hubert had no spirit to dine at his club, where he might be obliged to talk. He was smarting with the memory of an encounter that afternoon in the Park. What confounded right had that great smiling hulk Stephenson to be driving with his wife and Mrs Ordway in the Park! And they had none of them even seen him, they had been so engrossed!

He sat for some time after dinner, moodily sipping claret and frowning at his own thoughts, and then he went up to dress. When that operation was ended it was still rather early; but Hubert did not mind. He was too restless to do anything. He lit a cigarette at the front door as the old butler came out and helped him on with his overcoat.

"Thanks, Adams," he said. "Tell my father when he comes in that I shall be——Oh, I forgot, I shall see him myself."

The old servant stood and watched his young

master's retreating form, and then he turned back, slightly shaking his head.

"'E didn't heat any dinner," he muttered, "nor 'as this some time past. It doesn't appear to me as foreign travel is good for young gentlemen; but it's none of my business."

Meanwhile Hubert sauntered along. The June evening was growing dusk. The intense heat of the day was over, but both the air and the faces of the passers-by appeared exhausted by it. Hubert left the quieter terraces and crescents behind him, the streets that were the homes of the well-to-do, with great front doors and dull railings and weary attempts at flower-growing in the little brick balconies over the entrances, where groups of ladies were occasionally to be seen, sitting out in light evening dresses and trying to get a breath of reasonable air as they watched the carriages roll away with their nightly cargoes of pleasure-seekers.

Presently he reached the busier streets, and threaded his way through the great unlovely crowd. The hurrying, anxious, selfish faces; the mixture of poverty and horror with ease and wealth; the street cries; the roar of the traffic; the flower-sellers, with bunches of fragrant country roses; the inevitable costermonger scudding along in his tiny donkey-cart among

the huge omnibuses and carriages; all this was too familiar to Hubert for him to notice any of it, except the fact that it was unquestionably hot and disagreeable; and he hailed a hansom. In twenty minutes he found himself threading his way up Mrs Munro's broad marble staircase between the rows of tropical palms, and giving his name to the powdered footman at the curtained door, through which he could see, over the heads of the people round him, hundreds of lights in great hanging candelabra reflected in long mirrors and lighting up the brilliant and dainty crowd that stood grouped about on the polished floors; and far in the distance the familiar intervals of the violin could be heard tuning for the next dance.

CHAPTER VIII

Hubert wandered round the margin of the ball-room, scanning the faces in vain, and then he passed on into the next room, where easy chairs were dotted about among palms and flowers and shaded lamps. Here, in a corner, he espied a group with a familiar face in it.

He started rapidly forward, and as rapidly stopped short. Certainly there was Esther, looking lovely as she stood in the lamplight in a long robe of soft, creamy silk, a string of pearls he had given her on their wedding day round her slender throat, and a diamond star in her dark hair. She held a bouquet of pink and white roses, and poor Hubert noticed grimly that her appearance was remarkably like that of a bride. All this he observed at one glance, and then his eye wandered to her companions, and he stopped short. Esther was talking animatedly to an elderly gentleman with erect military carriage. It was Colonel Stanhope!

For a moment Hubert felt dazed. Then he stepped back into the shadow of the doorway, and furtively examined the group. They all seemed very merry. Yes, there was Mrs Ordway in a half mourning dress of pale, gleaming amethyst, and with a bouquet of heliotrope. She was talking to his mother, while Stephenson stood by, listening and smiling. Could they know? Was it possible? Hubert glanced at his father. The Colonel was looking well pleased, as certainly he might be. He was evidently making all his best little old-world speeches, and Esther was laughing and replying, with a certain roguery

in her bright eyes and red lips. No, he could not know that he was talking to his daughter-in-law! But Esther? She must know! What did she mean by it? What was she going to do?

At this moment the Colonel offered her his arm, which she took, and he marched proudly out with her in the direction of the ice-room. his head erect and his shoulders squared. The other three looked after them. Stephenson glanced from Mrs Stanhope to Hope, and then said something to Mrs Stanhope, who shook her head. Hubert saw it all plainly. Stanhope could not go down with Ralph and leave Hope alone. He laughed softly. Esther must indeed have charmed and bewitched his father, to make that very punctilious old gentleman so far forget his manners as to single her out and leave Hope! But Hubert's laugh was not a pleasant one.

"What a born fool I have been!" he said, with the picture before his eyes of his old father's proud and pleased air, and Esther's beauty and sweetness as she hung on his arm.

They all seemed very happy and contented without him, he thought bitterly. He felt half inclined to go home: no one would miss him.

But who had done all this? Who had introduced them? Stephenson! It could be

no other. And who the deuce had given them those bouquets? Stephenson again! Who else?

Hubert threw back his head, frowned, and came out of the doorway, and strode over to the three remaining ones of the group he had been watching. Here at least he was needed, he felt, if only to relieve them from their awkward position, by taking Hope down, and leaving his mother to Stephenson.

He shook hands gravely with Hope, bowed to his mother, and nodded at Ralph, all rather with the air of a hero of tragedy.

"Why, Hubert, dear child," said his mother, "do you know Mrs Ordway? Oh, you met in America!"

"Ah, no, Mrs Stanhope! I have become acquainted with your son since we came over."

"Oh, of course. Hubert is continually trying to impress me with the size of America. He says I always expect him to have met American people now. But of course it would be quite wonderful if he had."

"Not so very wonderful, mother," said Hubert dryly. "The most marvellous coincidences have been known to take place."

"Yes, indeed!" broke in Mrs Ordway. "Such as you and Esther Green having met—but only once, I think you said?"

"Esther Green?—that is your lovely friend that is with you, is it not? Dear me, Hubert, have you met her too? You never told us!" cried his mother reproachfully.

No, he never had.

Hope laughed gaily. "But he could not tell you of every one he met there, could he?" she said. "And there is nothing especially notable about Esther, you know."

"She is very beautiful, quite a picture," replied Mrs Stanhope. "Are you to be in town long? You must both come and see us. And you were both kind to my boy in America, I think you said? And your friend, Mr Stephenson, he is like another son to us—are you not, Ralph? Indeed, you must come. My husband——"

"I came to ask if you wouldn't come downstairs and have some coffee or something," Hubert broke in, almost rudely. "And if Stephenson would——"

"Yes, yes," said his mother, "Ralph shall take me down, and we'll find my husband and Miss—Green, I think you said?—Miss Green, and we'll arrange it. I am sure you haven't seen everything in London yet, and it would be such a pleasure to my boy to show you any of the sights here after all your kindness to him at your home."

"But, my dear Mrs Stanhope-"

But Mrs Stanhope had gone with Ralph; so all Hope could do was to take Hubert's arm and follow them.

When they went into the ice-room downstairs it was crowded, but Esther and Colonel Stanhope were standing at the door, and another old gentleman with an order on his breast, whom the Colonel had evidently introduced to Esther. Mrs Stanhope and Stephenson went up to them, and Hubert followed with Hope.

"How do you do, General," said Mrs Stanhope. "It is not often we meet you at these frivolous occasions now."

The old gentleman laughed and dropped his eye-glasses, and murmured something about the days of his youth.

"Algernon," said Mrs Stanhope, "I want to arrange for Mrs Ordway and Miss Green to come and see us. Just fancy, dear, I find that they both knew Hubert in America, and I am sure helped to make his visit happy for him. And Mrs Ordway is quite an old friend of Ralph's, too! And I tell them that they must let us see something of them."

"Indeed it will be conferring a great pleasure upon us," responded the Colonel; "if we have anything to offer that will serve to entertain such charming guests." "Then I shall come and call upon you to-morrow, and we might drive somewhere afterwards," said Mrs Stanhope.

While they were arranging this, Hubert slipped round to where Esther stood.

"Esther," he said in a soft voice, "will you give me a dance?"

But Esther lifted her eyebrows coldly, and replied in a tone loud enough for the Colonel, who stood beside her, to overhear, "Thank you, Mr Stanhope, but I am not going to dance to-night;" then she looked up at the Colonel, took his arm, and moved away with him.

Hubert felt for a moment as if he had indeed addressed a stranger by her Christian name, and he felt his face grow hot with annoyance. It was all too absurd!—but he had to attend to Hope. She kept him a long time downstairs, talking about America and American customs, and he answered vaguely. Then she took him slowly upstairs.

"But how delightful your father and mother are!" she said. "We do not have many fathers like that over with us. They mostly regard their sons and daughters as amusing oddities, capable of any strange action. Now, I should think your father would require you to act as a sane man, like himself. Military men,

as a rule, don't regard youth as an excuse for imprudence, do they?"

"Well, they are strict in their notions; 'stern military discipline,' and that sort of thing; but I think I usually act 'like a sane man,'" he added, smiling down at her.

"Well, now, do you?" she answered, with an innocent air of seeking information in her wide-open grey eyes.

Hubert grew hot and confused. Could this dainty young American widow know?

"Your mother is so hospitable," she went on; "but I cannot get her to believe we did not meet—you and I—in America. It was Mr Stephenson, I told her, who knew me out there."

"Well, it doesn't make much difference," responded Hubert wearily.

"To you?—or to me?" and Hope laughed softly at his boyish misery.

At that moment the Colonel joined them.

"Miss Green has cruelly deserted me, Mrs Ordway," he said. "She has yielded to young Stephenson's persuasions and gone to join the giddy throng," and he waved his hand towards the ballroom, whence the faint strains of a waltz were heard.

Hubert uttered a suppressed exclamation, and his father turned to him.

"Yes, yes, my boy," he said, with an amused

chuckle. "I know what that means! I heard! She wouldn't desert me when you asked her, would she, eh? Well, well, since you're not acceptable here, go and take your mother home, like a good boy, for she's tired out, and I have got to go back with General Dowell to the Club."

Hubert went. What could he gain now by waiting?

- "Your son is very obedient and dutiful," said Hope, gazing with a touch of pity after his retreating figure. "He has only been here about an hour. Does he not want to dance?"
- "Not if his mother wants to go home," replied the Colonel promptly. "No, madam, my son has been taught his duty to his parents!"
- "Now, has he?" replied Hope, with the same innocent air of seeking information which had ruffled Hubert.

CHAPTER IX

THE next morning at breakfast Colonel and Mrs Stanhope were overflowing with praises of the two American ladies, while Hubert sat by, growing wild with the suppressed agony of his feelings.

"It is so pleasant to meet new people-such

sweet girls, too, both of them," said Mrs Stanhope. "Each so different from the other, and yet each so perfect in her own way! The young widow—so fair and graceful—perfectly charming!—such dignity!—but her friend, Miss Green! Did you ever see such a rich little beauty, Algernon?"

"Beautiful girl! Charming!" responded the Colonel heartily; "never met a girl I admired more. Young Stephenson is in luck."

"Oh, my dear, do you really think——" his wife began.

"Think? Why, any one could see how it lies. He almost told us as much when he brought them up. Nice lad that. Very nice thing of him to do—to bring them straight to us. I should like to show them some attention while they are in town—for Stephenson's sake as well. Hubert! what are you sitting with your hands in your pockets for, looking as if you saw a ghost? Young men in my days sat at table like gentlemen."

They rose from the table. Mrs Stanhope announced her intention of going to see Mrs Ordway and Miss Green in the forenoon, and bringing them back to lunch, so that after luncheon they might take them somewhere.

"Isn't it rather rapid hospitality?" observed Hubert sulkily.

"No, dear, no, because they say they think of leaving London, after all, on Monday, and one can do nothing much on Sunday."

"I should think your mother is the better judge of social matters," growled the old Colonel.

"Algernon, my love!" remonstrated his wife mildly. He was evidently cross this morning.

"Did you say Mrs Ordway and Miss Green were leaving on Monday, sir?" asked Hubert, two hours later, going into the library, where his father was sitting reading the *Times* through a pair of gold eye-glasses.

"Yes, I did," replied the Colonel, looking up keenly.

Hubert fidgeted about the room. He had spent a miserable two hours since breakfast. If Esther did not give him an opportunity of speaking to her to-day, he would have to take the matter into his own hands, and brave her displeasure. Oh, where would it all end?

"Hubert!"

Hubert started, thereby dropping an ivory paper-cutter he was handling.

"God bless my soul, boy! are you getting nerves?" his father exclaimed testily.

Hubert laughed uneasily.

"What were you going to say, sir?" he enquired.

"Going to say, sir?—going to say? I was

going to ask if you didn't intend to change your coat before luncheon, considering who are coming to it. When I was a young fellow of your age I would have thought a good deal about the colour of my tie if I had been going to entertain one of the loveliest girls in creation; but I tell you what it is, Hubert, you young men nowadays are all so blase and self-conceited and poor-spirited that—that you ought to be ashamed of yourselves! Why couldn't you persuade her to dance with you last night? Stephenson could! Why couldn't you make yourself agreeable to her? You behaved like a young boor. I was ashamed of you, sir positively ashamed of you! I felt obliged to send you home; and that nice frank lad Stephenson had it all his own way after you left. I can assure vou."

Hubert was very white, and he held the mantelpiece with one hand, and looked down at his father as he answered.

"Why should you wish me to make myself agreeable to her, sir? You never before expressed any desire with regard to my behaviour to any one."

"No, I didn't, sir! I never saw any one before that—that impressed me so favourably! But it's too late now. Young Stephenson—"

"Damn Stephenson!"

"I'll tell you what, sir!" exclaimed the Colonel, jumping up. "I'll tell you what!— I won't have you swear at me, sir! Do you hear? Just because your friend has more sense, and more—yes, and more manners—than you, and can make a beautiful, winning, graceful, charming girl like that——"

"By Jove, sir, do you know her father was a tinsmith in Chicago?" cried Hubert.

For half a moment the old gentleman was staggered; then he regained himself.

"Well, sir, and what of that?" he enquired with dignity. "Does it affect the young lady herself what her father was?"

Hubert sank back with a gasp, and balanced himself on the edge of the table, and stared idiotically at his father.

"This from you, sir!" he said in a low voice. The Colonel's ire was roused at the suggestion of inconsistency.

"You are a stuck-up puppy!" he exclaimed; "a stuck-up, conceited young ass! Do you mean to tell me that your blood runs so slowly in your veins that you stop to think of a girl's antecedents before falling in love with her? Why, it's enough to puzzle any one how you could have met Miss Green out in America, and come calmly home again with your heart in its ordinary place."

- "But I didn't, sir!" exclaimed Hubert eagerly. "That's just what I didn't do! Listen, father! I fell in love with Esther Green the first time I met her—and then—"
- "Well, she didn't return it, then," observed the Colonel testily.
 - "But she did, sir; she---"
- "Well, she's got over it then," responded the Colonel dryly. "Any one could see last night that Ralph Stephenson——"
 - "Oh, hang Ralph Stephenson-"
- "Thanks, old man. Why?" was heard in Stephenson's voice, and "Hubert! Oh, Hubert, dear!" And Hubert turned a flushed and excited face, and saw his mother and Hope standing in the doorway, with Esther and Stephenson just behind them. They had evidently all overheard his last exclamation, for his mother was looking shocked, and Stephenson was laughing over her shoulder.

Hubert rushed wildly forward, past his mother, and took hold of Esther's hand.

"Esther!" he exclaimed, "Oh, don't let us have any more of this! We must tell them—we must tell them now!"

Esther put her little head on one side reflectively.

"Well, I reckon it's about time," she responded.

An hour later the Colonel sat on the sofa, with Esther beside him, gently stroking her hair.

- "Where's that young lad Stephenson, poor fellow?" he asked suddenly.
 - "Shall I go and see, father?" asked Hubert.
- "No—no. Better send your mother. Women know best how to deal with such matters!"

Mrs Stanhope went, pausing to pull down her son's head and kiss him as she passed.

- "You are all too good to forgive me like this!" Hubert exclaimed.
- "What 'matters'?" asked Esther quickly of the Colonel.
- "What matters?—oh, about your Stephenson? Ah, well! Ah, well! We can't expect the course of true love to run smooth for everybody, you know, little one!"

Esther looked up wonderingly.

- "Why, I think Hope——" she began, and then the door opened, and Mrs Stanhope led Hope and Stephenson in. Mrs Stanhope was beaming. Hope ran to Esther and put her arms softly round her.
- "Oh, Esther, darling," she whispered. "We are both so happy!"

A MOULTED FEATHER

A MOULTED FEATHER

"I crossed a moor, with a name of its own and a use in the world, no doubt,

Yet a hand's-breadth of it shines alone 'mid the blank miles round about:

For there I picked up on the heather, and there I put inside my breast,

A moulted feather, an eagle feather—well, I forget the rest."

CHAPTER I

A GIRL standing at a window and looking down into a dull street leading off one of the city squares, and a young man stretched indolently in an arm-chair, watching her. Without, a misty, drizzling day settling itself to rain, and the rattle of an occasional cab along the street; within, a dingy morning-room flavoured by tobacco smoke, a half-kindled fire, and the sound of a grating violin being practised with uncertain skill in some distant upper room.

"I really can't stand it any longer," remarked the girl at the window, without turning round. "I don't see what else you can do, Poll," replied the young man.

The girl did not answer. She drummed with her fingers on the window pane, and seemed to be studying the houses opposite. Her figure was outlined against the steaming glass, and her brother looked at her approvingly.

Presently she turned, and stood leaning upon the back of a chair, facing her brother.

"I wish mother had never married again!" she exclaimed.

"Well, she has married again, and there's an end of it. It does no good to grumble."

"It's a relief!" she answered quickly; "and I don't think I do grumble much—except to you. And oh, Reggie, if one didn't feel so inclined to laugh, one would feel dreadfully inclined to cry!"

Her brother shrugged his shoulders, and then readjusted the cushion which the movement had displaced, and examined the shape of his nails.

"It's all very well for you," his sister continued, answering his attitude rather than his words; "you have your friends and your club, and your own pursuits—though why you live at home when you have plenty of money and could get out of our step-father's radius I can't imagine—but think of me, Reggie!"

"He's a very worthy little man in his way," replied her brother.

The girl made a gesture of impatience. "He's in my way," she said.

Her brother looked at her, with a lazily amused expression, as she sank down into the chair against which she had been leaning. She was a pretty girl, with rich lights in her fair hair, and wonderful blue eyes with heavy lids.

"You ought to marry, Poll," remarked her brother at last.

The girl roused herself, and looked at him with unutterable scorn in her eyes, and met his amused gaze.

"Marry!" she exclaimed. "That is what you men always advise us to do! Whom should I marry, pray? I haven't yet seen the individual whose companionship tempted me. Now, if there were a seven years' system of marriage, with a mutual break at the end of three—but even that is too long."

"My dear Poll!"

She got up and walked back to her post at the window, and her brother got up too, and looked at himself in the glass over the mantelpiece.

"If we have finished our daily discussion of the family problem, I shall go out," he remarked. His sister turned round and laughed. "Then I shall inherit your newspaper," she said. "How is it that the most unselfish and chivalrous man living will never own a woman's right to look at the daily papers till he has done with them?"

But when her brother had gone she did not touch the paper. The laugh faded from her face, and she dropped into the chair her brother had vacated, which was the most comfortable one in the room. The scraping violin still sounded from above, and the rain fell in torrents outside, and the drops came down the chimney and hissed into the fire.

How rapidly her fancy flew to its accustomed haunts, like a liberated and hungry carrierpigeon! The pleasant English home, the clematis over the verandah, the smooth green lawns and the shady elms-how well she remembered it all! And within doors the happy drawing-room, with the marquetry floor and the bowls of roses—and mingled with it all the memory of her father, kindly and genial and courteous. This was the home she and Reginald had been brought up in, where they had run races up the lawn, and their father had stood on the verandah holding up the chocolate for the winner. Joan had been a baby in the nursery then, and the violin unheard of-and unheard. Ah, that violin! it had been the beginning of much evil! It had introduced Mr Dubrucq into their family circle!

The English country life which May Heathcote had been fostered in and still loved had never suited her mother. Mrs Heathcote had aspired to be literary and political, and had affected to despise her country neighbours and their tastes, and her husband's very respectable and conservative family. In reality the poor lady had never been sufficiently educated to have any very pronounced tastes of her own: but she had mistaken a half-indefinite longing for another kind of life than that to which her Maker had been pleased to call her for the promptings of fettered talents, and she thus developed into an eccentric and untidy matron, with a craving for any kind of pleasure or excitement that came in her path. This is a characteristic of youth-a sort of human distemper—and ought to be got over before we are forty. We ought by then to have learnt that we never reach the indefinite Something: but that it is like the rainbow a child tries to run through. After all, the happiest thing in life is that rainbow.

Mrs Heathcote's want of sympathy with her life her husband had always met in a forbearing and chivalrous spirit. The pleasant, gentle, soft-spoken relations had regarded "poor Harry's wife" as some one different from themselves, and had made endless attempts at friendliness, which had always been repulsed. And then May's father had died, leaving his wife with a son at Oxford, and two daughters, one of eighteen and one of eleven, at home. The second daughter, Joan, was much more to her mother's taste than was May, who took after her father's side of the house. Joan was a strange, plain little thing, with a bilious complexion and gauche manners.

It was when Mrs Heathcote had been some time a widow, and her life had settled down into the old groove, and she was beginning to realise that she was vegetating, that Mr Dubrucq came into their neighbourhood, and was unquestioningly received as a genius, on the strength of his velveteen coat and his portfolio of sketches. He presented Joan with a violin, and made lessons on it a pretext for coming constantly to the house. May was at this time a very usual and simple specimen of English girlhood. She played tennis and golf and took a polite interest in cricket; she rode and drove and cycled about the country with her cousins and various friends; and when she and they found little Mr Dubrucq seated in the drawing-room at home, they simply regarded him as something inferior socially, and therefore to be treated with great politeness and consideration—some one who gave Joan music lessons, earned his living by art, and lodged over the bookseller's in the village.

And then one day Mrs Heathcote had told her daughter that Mr Dubrucq was to become her stepfather.

"He has asked me five times," she said, with a curious mixture of shame and pride.

When Reginald returned from college, his comment was given with a callousness that amazed his sister, who had been awaiting his coming for sympathy and advice.

"Why, the mater is fifteen years—if not twenty years—his senior! Surely she doesn't flatter herself that Dubrucq is in love with her, does she? I say, Poll, the little cad is marrying her for nothing else in the world than to put his paw on her money and ours! Well, we can do nothing. What I have is my own—in a sort of way—and the rest is the mater's, every stick and stone of it, and Dubrucq probably knows that as well as I do." And Reginald at this point relapsed into an appearance of indifference.

This was a new idea to May, who had been so busy trying to probe her mother's motives that she had forgotten to wonder at Mr Dubrucq's. It did not tend to make her regard Mr Dubrucq with more favour.

Mr Dubrucq disliked a country life, and Mrs Heathcote had never cared for it. The house and grounds were therefore sold, and the family, immediately after the marriage, removed to the city, where the *menage* was, as before, maintained by their mother, although it was Mr Dubrucq's name that appeared in the Directory. Reginald came with them, and was apparently satisfied with his new rôle of stepson, although he chose to treat his stepfather as his junior. Joan continued to practise with excruciating diligence on her violin, and May tried to make the best of the situation, and to help her mother to entertain their new circle of friends.

They were an incongruous family. The incongruity may be said to have ebbed and flowed. When it ebbed, the life in that little household was simply commonplace, with even something in it of an alleviating humour. But when it flowed, May became distinctly unhappy, and inclined to philosophise. Her sister Joan did not desire companionship. She had an attic of her own in the roof, where the fitful sunshine played on the cobwebs on the ceiling, and the damp paper hung in mouldy flaps from the walls, and whence issued long wails as of a beast in agony, or, worse still, uncertain scrapings embodying the ghosts of well-known airs. May soon gave up Joan and her inevitable

fiddle as a hopeless problem; but she tried hard, sometimes with tears in her own little solitary room, to solve that other problem of her only brother, whom she loved more than anything else in the world. Why did he continue to live here in idleness? How changed he was from the athletic undergraduate she had been so fond of when she and her father had gone together to the "Eights," and put up, with other proud parents and sisters, at the Randolph, and "done" the ancient little town under Reggie's somewhat insufficient ciceroneship. Reginald had grown inert, and accepted his life with a lazy amusement that exasperated his sister. He made open fun of his stepfather; and, curiously, he was the only one Mr Dubrucq appeared afraid of-possibly because he was the only one entirely independent of his mother's fortune.

"Why do you remain so contentedly at home?" his sister used to enquire.

And Reginald would smile and light a cigar and go out—to the reason.

CHAPTER II

MR DUBRUCQ sat in his studio. It had not got a north light, which is supposed to be indispen-

sable to a professional artist, but Mr Dubrucq had not discovered that. He was more than satisfied with his comfortable quarters, and sat in front of his easel, and kicked his feet and smoked a cigar. He was not yet accustomed to the unwonted joy of really good cigars, and he smoked this one slowly and with evident relish.

The door opened behind him, and his wife came in. She brought a blast of fresh air into the room, and as she shut the door the draught blew a newspaper and some letters off a table on to the floor.

Mr Dubrucq looked round annoyed, but without moving. Mrs Dubrucq sat down by him. She appeared anxious and worried.

"I am troubled about Reginald, Albert," she said.

Her husband slowly uplifted his eyebrows.

"I should think your son was old enough to take care of himself," he said.

Mrs Dubrucq flushed painfully.

"Young men of six-and-twenty——" she began.

"Seven-and-twenty," corrected her husband. Mrs Dubrucq rose and picked up the rustling newspaper and letters, and replaced them.

"Well, what is wrong with Reginald?" queried the artist, watching her.

"I can't think what makes him so contented with doing nothing."

Albert Dubrucq laughed noisily, and then he knotted his handkerchief over three of his fingers and began imitating a rabbit with it. It was a pleasant boyish way he had of beguiling himself, and it irritated his wife extremely.

"I can't think what is keeping either of your elder children at home," he said, wagging the rabbit's ears vigorously. "I am tired of being mistaken for Reginald's son, and having May passed off as my bride."

His wife said nothing.

"A man can't feel master in his own house," he went on.

"No, he can't," agreed his wife, with a tinge of meaning.

"How am I ever to complete my great picture if you come here talking to me when I'm at work?" asked Albert Dubrucq, with a change of voice; and he took the handkerchief off his fingers, and thrust it all knotted up into the pocket of his velveteen coat, and turned to his canvas.

When his wife had left the room, the artist laid down his palette and lit another cigar. It was certainly hard on a man, after five and thirty years of bachelorhood, to be suddenly thrust into the responsibilities of a grown-up

son. It was a position of affairs which demanded a good deal of nicotine to soothe the nerves, and a complete relaxation from mental exertion.

There is never smoke without fire; and Reginald, having discovered that the house was full of smoke, wisely determined to show his family the full glory of the flames. He announced that evening that he was engaged to Miss Malcolm, the most charming orphan daughter of the late Major-General Malcolm, of the 2nd Bengal Infantry.

Mrs Dubrucq took the tidings in an unkindly spirit. She wept copiously.

"You might have told me before!" she cried.

"Couldn't, very well," he answered laconically. "Didn't know myself."

"My children are withdrawing their confidence from me."

Her son looked at her curiously.

"Shouldn't wonder if May shocks you next," he remarked cruelly, "by marrying old Hardy, so as to get out of all this."

His mother looked up quickly.

"Mr Hardy! May!" she exclaimed.
"Why, Mr Hardy is nearly seventy years of age!—and he is not the kind of man—I mean—oh, no! May would never dream——"

"Now, look here, mater, you listen to me.

You married to please yourself, and you didn't think much of us when you did it. Now it seems to me you haven't much right to a say in the matter if we try to get out of this. I think you had better be reasonable about it."

His mother put a damp handkerchief with some dignity into her pocket.

"I used to think you such a gentlemanly boy," she observed coldly.

"I daresay I was," he replied complacently.

"I wonder what she is like!" May said, when she was told. Our first feeling towards our brothers' wives and our sisters' husbands is one of natural resentment, if we are human—which we mostly are.

"Well, I am going to call to-day, and shall ask her to dine with us to-morrow, so you will be able to judge then," replied Mrs Dubrucq wearily. "You had better make up your mind to like her, for I fancy it will ultimately end in her coming to live here with us."

"To live here! Why?" asked May, her blue eyes wide with amazement.

"Well — Reginald lives here," said her mother evasively.

"Yes, but I have often wondered why he does; and surely now he will prefer to have a house of his own."

"Then you shouldn't wonder about what

doesn't in the least concern you," said her mother irritably; and this was the first hint that May received that there really was a reason for Reginald's stay-at-home propensities. She immediately began to fear that he had lost all his money, and she looked at her mother in consternation.

"I'll tell you what I advise you to do, May," said Mrs Dubrucq coldly; "you had better make up your mind to accept Mr Hardy. You are not happy at home. Your brother doesn't want you any longer. Mr Hardy is older than you, certainly; but he is very rich, and will give you a comfortable home. It is the only way out of it that I see for you. I suppose my advice has not much weight with any of my children."

May was silent for some moments.

"Mr Hardy hasn't asked me to marry him," she said at length, "and I don't regard marriage as—in that light. But I will think over another 'way out of it'; for, possibly, mother, this house would be happier if there were fewer—spectators. And Reginald——" She bit her lip; she had never known before how devoted she was to her brother.

At that moment the door opened, and the cat rushed wildly into the room, with a knotted handkerchief tied tightly to her tail, and her green eyes distended. After her, in boisterous glee, came the little artist.

"Really, Albert, I do wish you would learn the proper use for pocket - handkerchiefs," remarked his wife irritably.

The little man stuck his hands into the pockets of his velveteen coat, and began to whistle, like a naughty boy caught in mischief. May seized an unobserved moment to release the outraged cat.

Next day Miss Malcolm came to dine with the family of her future husband, and Mr Hardy, May's elderly suitor, and a musical youth of negative aspect, were invited to make the numbers even, and in order to prevent too much conversation on family topics.

The bride-elect was very tall and thin, and with a great deal of manner. She had pale gold hair, elaborately done, and her aquiline nose was not without a suspicion of powder. She had very thin arms and very thin lips, and very keen eyes, which roved restlessly about the room, and noticed everything. It struck May that she was more interested in what she and her mother had on than she was in themselves. Joan she ignored; and to Mr Dubrucq, after one searching stare, she was barely civil.

She told Mrs Dubrucq she had been sent home from India when she was quite small,

and had never seen her mother again, for the mother had died when the daughter was at school in Paris. She had gone out to India when she was eighteen, and joined her father there. She drew a light veil over the number of years that had intervened between then and the day when she returned to England, an orphan, in the charge of an aunt. She talked with enthusiasm of India, of the early morning rides, and the social life and gaiety, and of the open house her father had kept. Of her elderly father himself she spoke without much feeling. She seemed to regard him as a dignified figurehead to the establishment, and a purveyor of the luxuries of life as well as its necessities. In both capacities she had missed him after she had brought his grey hairs with consternation to the grave. Her life in England had been dull and monotonous; she had fretted under it; and Reginald Heathcote had come as a refuge.

At dinner Miss Malcolm took observant note of everything, from the beautiful old crested silver, which had been in the Heathcote family for many a past generation, to the two little clumsy maids, who were part of the Dubrucq menage, and who had cleaned the said silver so badly. May had arranged masses of flowers on the dinner table; but they wasted their sweetness on unappreciative eyes.

When the ladies were alone after dinner, Joan played a long piece on the violin, and May accompanied her, while Mrs Dubrucq and her son's fiancée made fitful conversation to one another on a distant sofa. When the gentlemen came upstairs, Mr Dubrucq did not accompany them. The musical youth took May's place at the piano, Reginald joined the two ladies by the sofa, and Mr Hardy approached May.

Mr Hardy was sixty-nine years of age, his head was somewhat bald, and he habitually wore black clothes, black studs, a black tie, and white cotton socks. He was very kindly and courteous, but his conversation was a little tedious.

"Very well, Miss May," he observed, "very well. May I offer you a chair? And so I am to understand that the charming lady I have been invited to meet to-night is about to be married to your brother."

"Yes," said May wistfully, turning her eyes to her new sister-in-law.

"Oh, very well, very well—very good. So far for that."

He stopped, and looked round the drawingroom, and then at the girl at his side. He was a kindly-disposed old gentleman, and he was genuinely sorry for her. It took him a long time to understand anything, but he thought he understood her case. He cleared his throat.

"There is something I would like you to take into your consideration, Miss May. When I say consideration, I mean that I would ask you to consider it. Do I understand that you follow me?"

May bowed her head.

"Very well, very good—just so. I am an old gentleman, Miss May; when I say old, I mean aged; and you are a beautiful and charming young lady. So far for that. Do I understand that the disparity between our ages would be a hindrance to you? Or do I understand that you would overlook that drawback, and consent to become my wife, and when I say wife, you understand I mean—yes—wife."

"I wish I could," murmured May. "I wish I could, but I simply can't."

"Wait a moment, wait a moment, young lady. I have not said all I have got to say. Although I am such a very old gentleman in your young eyes, yet I have a good deal to offer you; yes, a good deal. I have a large property, Miss May, and when I say a large property, you understand I mean that I possess a great deal, and I have no relations in

this world. I have a great respect for you—I have observed you much. Very well. In the natural course of events you would not be long troubled with me, and when I am gone, you would then have wealth to enjoy yourself. Very good. Think it over, young lady, think it over."

May's eyes filled with tears.

"You are very good to me," she said. "Since my father died no one has been so kind to me as you have been. This makes it all the more impossible. It would not be fair to you. You must not think I am ungrateful, but—I simply couldn't, Mr Hardy."

"Very well, Miss May; so far for that," he answered.

"I am afraid I haven't bettered the situation for you, Poll," remarked her brother to her next day; "but when you and Millicent get chummy, it will be comfortable for you to have her to go about with."

"It is nice of you to think of it, Reggie," she answered; "but do you know I have been thinking it would make it easier for everybody if I—went away. I am going," she said, with a little laugh that tried hard to be natural, "to adopt the time-honoured precedent, and 'go out as a governess.' I really think," she went on hastily, as she saw him turn dark crimson, and

open his lips to remonstrate, "that it will be a good plan. I have already sent an advertisement to the papers, and I have no doubt I shall soon find something suitable."

"But it is not suitable at all, Poll," said her brother slowly. "Are you sure there is no other way out of it than that? Hardy——"

"Oh, don't let us discuss me any longer," said the girl. "I am tired of the subject. Let us talk of something more interesting."

Her brother looked at her—at the pale, proud little face; at the well-bred carriage; at the rich blue eyes beneath the heavy white lids; and his heart smote him.

"Well, you are a little brick, Poll, that is all I can say!" he cried; and his sister flushed with pleasure at his praise.

"I haven't congratulated you properly yet," she said shyly; and she kissed him.

But when she went upstairs she took down her father's photograph from the bracket where it stood, and looked long into the kind eyes, till her own grew too dim to see. She remembered a day at Oxford, long ago, when she and Reggie had walked down by Mesopotamia with her father, and had talked over Reginald's future, and all that he was to do and to be. And now that father slept with his gentle ancestors, and Mr Dubrucq reigned in his stead.

CHAPTER III

THERE was once a young clergyman, who came straight from one of the English Universities to a charge in a slum, and found a stifling room inhabited by five families—a family in each corner, and one in the centre. "We got on real comfortable, sir," explained a woman to him, in answer to his exclamation of horror; "real pleasant, till the family in the centre took a lodger."

So it was with the Dubrucqs. The elements had commingled if they had not solidly combined; but now Reginald Heathcote had introduced Millicent Malcolm, and this produced a ferment.

Mrs Heathcote did not care for the arrangement of living with her husband's family; she had anticipated an establishment of her own. In this she had May's entire sympathy; but May was afraid of showing it, having a lurking fear that Reginald had reasons for the plan. She knew that Mrs Reginald had not much wealth of her own—except in kind. Mrs Reginald always spoke of the arrangement as temporary, and so, indeed, did Reginald, but with lazy inertness that boded permanency.

Meanwhile, the bride did not add to the peace

of the home. She treated little Mr Dubrucq with such superb disdain that he broke into open revolt, or rather into private revolt, of the traces appeared in poor Mrs which Dubrucg's harassed countenance. May she assumed an air of condescending patronage, which amused the younger girl. Joan developed a warm admiration of her new relation, who accepted her homage with graciousness, and even expressed a polite liking for the violin, to which, as she was entirely without any ear for music, she could listen without flinching. In a moment of sheer maliciousness she suggested to Joan the possibility of making a public use of her talents.

"Many ladies do things nowadays," she observed, yawning; "it is quite *chic* to earn money." She was lying on the sofa at the moment. She spent most of her days on the sofa, and explained this as a habit easily acquired in India.

Joan listened open-mouthed, and hugged her violin, and felt her time had come. Having wantonly struck the spark, Mrs Heathcote watched the conflagration with amusement from her horizontal position. Mrs Dubrucq had always been fonder of Joan—queer, plain, brown-faced Joan,—than of either of her more presentable children. It was a keener pang to

her to find her authority over Joan drifting from her than was anything she had yet been called upon to suffer.

"You could never make any use of your music in that way, Joan," she said to her. "I should not wish you to do so."

Joan frowned.

"Millicent says-" she began.

"Millicent means to be kind to you, but she knows nothing about music," said Mrs Dubrucq coldly. "You don't play well enough."

"Mr Dubrucq says I do. He says I shall have to earn my own living some day, that I'm too plain for anything else. And Millicent says many ladies do things now. I'm sure all the people who come to this house do something!"

"I wish you could prevail on Millicent not to fill the child's head with such notions," Mrs Dubrucq cried appealingly to Reggie when Joan had left the room.

But it appeared that Mrs Dubrucq had taken her son at an unfortunate moment.

He looked at his mother over the top of his newspaper.

"I'll take Millicent away to-morrow," he said quietly, dropping his eyes again. And Mrs Dubrucq knew what he meant. If he left the house, his income, which was double her own jointure, left with him.

"Reginald, how can you be so ungrateful—so rude!" she said. "Do you not remember, when I paid your Oxford debts, you said you would live with us for the next four or five years, and so pay the money off to me gradually? And do you suppose Mr Dubrucq knows? Do you wish him told?"

Reginald raised his eyebrows carelessly.

"I don't suppose you want him to know either," he replied. "The arrangement is quite a comfortable one as far as I am concerned; but as long as I help to prop the house containing this strange assortment of human beings, I expect all the inmates, barring myself, to be civil to my wife." And with that he folded his paper and left the room.

Mrs Dubrucq crossed her untidy drawingroom, and sat down in a gaping easy chair. Her expression was a troubled one. Joan bounced in, but, seeing her mother, went sulkily away again to the violin. May came in, shut the door gently behind her, and moved about the room collecting dead flowers and smoothing rumpled draperies.

"May," said her mother, watching her. May started.

"Are you there, mother? How still you were sitting!"

"May, what do you think of Reginald's wife?"

May smiled ruefully, and looked at her mother. "We'll have to try not to quarrel," she said wickedly.

Mrs Dubrucq sighed.

"She was brought up in India, you know, mamma."

"Yes, but she isn't in India now: she's here."

"Yes, more's the pity! But you know what grandfather used to say when we children found fault with any one, 'It takes all kinds to make a world, my dears.' So this house is a small world in itself, I fancy."

Mr Dubrucq entered at this moment, attired in his dressing-gown, and wearing a cap with a tassel, a pair of embroidered slippers, and smoking a cigar. May escaped from the room.

"I must say your family is a sweet-tempered one, Mrs Dubrucq," Albert Dubrucq remarked, regarding his wife curiously. "That long-legged, long-moustached son of yours is occupying two chairs in the smoking-room, and didn't make me very welcome. Joan is in the devil of a temper. May avoids me. Mrs Reginald Heathcote treats me like the scum of the earth. It is a little more than a man with any self-respect can stand."

Mrs Dubrucq opened her lips to speak, and then shut them again. Her husband began to spin a three-legged stool in the middle of the floor. It occasionally fell with a crash. When it had done this for about the sixth time Mrs Dubrucq got up fretfully and began to pace the room, casting glances of annoyance at her small husband, who went on spinning imperturbably.

"I must say your amusements are very childish," she cried at last.

"Well, comparatively speaking, I am a child," was the answer.

Mrs Dubrucq walked to the window, her lips quivering. She looked down over the ill-kept flower-boxes in the balcony, and tried to compose her voice.

"I think you are very cruel to me, Albert," she said presently, without turning round.

"That's right, make a scene," he jeered.

"No, I shall not make a scene. It is—vulgar."

"Oh, I suppose you mean to insinuate that I am vulgar?"

"I should be sorry to do so. It would be confessing that I had made a mistake." She clasped her hands tightly together, and then added quickly, still looking straight across at the houses opposite: "All my friends warned me that I was making a mistake, and I begin to think that they may have been right."

Mr Dubrucq left off spinning the stool, and

kicked it away from him, and his face wore an unpleasant expression.

"Your friends?" he asked. "Who are they? I don't see much of them."

"No," she cried, turning round to him. "I gave up everything for you—society, liberty, position, home, my children's love—my own good conscience and peace of mind. Why did I do it?"

"Can't say, I'm sure. Never tried to fathom a woman's motives yet."

"Well, it took some time," she said bitterly; and the little man winced.

"And you told me you were an artist, and only needed my help to let you make a fair start with your great picture and have the world at your feet. You promised me fame!"

"Oh, if you're going to repeat all my soft nothings—"

"And you said we should command the society of all the great men of the day—artists, musicians, authors, politicians,—the men who make life worth living! And instead of that, I find my house overrun with a crowd of hungry, dirty, tawdry people who have never done anything and never will do anything. You don't seem to know how to behave with any dignity whatsoever. You constantly chagrin me before my children and my servants and your friends."

The little man rose, scarlet with fury.

"Very well, I'll try to behave as if I were fifty-three instead of thirty-seven," he replied.

At this moment Reggie and his wife came in, followed by Joan with her violin under her arm. Joan went and sat down on a distant table, and began putting a new string into her violin, worrying a knot with her teeth, and paying no heed to anybody. Reginald took in his stepfather at a glance, and then the young man pulled his moustache with a disgusted expression. Mrs Reginald glanced coldly round, and the soul of a whip-snake shot into her vapid eyes.

Before any one had time to speak, May entered the room. She had on a white dress, and the sun touched her fair hair, and she walked with a light, elastic step, with her blue eyes shining. She held a letter in her hand, and she gave it to her mother to read. Then she stood by while Mrs Dubrucq did so, with her hand on her mother's arm, and read the letter again, over her mother's shoulder.

May's letter was from an aunt on her father's side, inviting her to come and spend the autumn with them at a shooting they had taken in Scotland.

"I knew it would be painful to you, dear, to see the old places again, and that is why we have not asked you before to visit us at home; but your cousins clamour to see you; and indeed you must come, dear child, and not forget your father's kinsfolk, who love you so for his sake."

A sudden yell interrupted them. Mr Dubrucq, sauntering about the room, had spied the cat asleep on an arm-chair, and had been unable to resist the temptation to lift it up suddenly by its tail. He was now holding it thus at arm's length, and the cat was struggling wildly.

Joan took advantage of the noise to tune the new string she had put in, and Reginald murmured to his wife—

> "He only does it to annoy, Because he knows it teases!"

The cat, with a final yell, escaped, and stalked stiffly away, shaking itself.

Mrs Dubrucq folded the letter and gave it back to her daughter.

"Of course you must go," she said wistfully. "You will be very happy there."

CHAPTER IV

MAY HEATHCOTE was standing on the lawn at Strathalloch, and her eyes wandered up to the pine-clad hill, rising sheer in front of her till the pines met the sky, and to the great stretches of moorland to her left, rich in colour—deep purple and dull green—and with white sheep dotted here and there grazing. She had arrived the night before, and had barely had time to make acquaintance with the house party. Her uncle and aunt and cousins she had, of course, known all her life. Her aunt, Mrs. Mostyn, was a pleasant specimen of an English lady, fair and placid, and had but one care in life, the care that comes to a properly-conducted woman-a husband. Mr Mostyn looked older than when May had last seen him, and he was clad in Harris tweeds, and greeted his niece-inlaw with kindly hospitality, but was a little absorbed in a question regarding what was included under the head "various" in the game list of the day before. The group of cousins consisted of two boys, "in all the joy of their youth and the glory of shooting jackets," and Sybil, a year May's junior. In old days Mrs Mostyn had cherished a dream of uniting Sybil and her cousin Reginald Heathcote in holy wedlock; and in those days May had thought Sybil, with her pink and white face and red hair, her Parisian toilettes and her affected manners. not nearly good enough for Reginald. Now, thinking of that other, poor May was not at all sure that she would not have preferred to see her cousin Sybil, with all her faults, in the other's place.

There were several people staying in the house—the Hon. Mrs Paul, Mr Mostyn's widowed sister-in-law, a tall, elegant woman in conventional weeds; Mr Holmes, a retired London barrister; and another young man whom Sybil had explained as a journalistic artist, or an artistic journalist, she forgot which. To-day the men of the party had all gone off to shoot with dogs and the keeper, and May had noticed that the London barrister, who had looked so well the previous evening in his dress clothes, now displayed very attenuated muscle, and did not compare favourably with the others. After the bustle of departure Sybil came out and joined May on the lawn.

"That is the worst of a shooting," she observed to May petulantly; "the men go out all day, and are so sleepy after dinner that they are barely civil."

May laughed.

"Which of them is it, Syb?" she asked.

"But I have always found that," her cousin continued, "if you want to pierce through the thin veneer of chivalry which is all the modern young man has to cover the hideous savage, all you have got to do is to interfere with his sport. My dear, have you ever put up a covey of

grouse on a moor? Have you ever called out to a fisher when the salmon were rising? Have you ever asked a man a question just at the finish of a race? Have you ever—worst of all—lifted a golf ball to see what it was? If you have done any one of these things, you must know, May dear, that the age of chivalry is over. Come for a walk."

At mid-day Sybil drove May in the little jolting governess-cart up the moor road with the luncheon.

Oh the glorious stretches of rich moor, broken only by the peat cuttings! Oh the wild hill-side, with the deep heather smelling of honey, and the bog-myrtle, and the mossy swamps! Oh the hot sun beating down, and the wild wind off the distant sea! It was all new to May.

"I don't think any love-making would be perfect," she said, interrupting Sybil, who was dilating on the merits of old suede gloves for driving, "unless some of it at least took place among the heather."

"I don't know," replied Sybil, reflectively, still examining one of her gloved hands, while the other held the reins loosely. "One has had so many fictitious passions among the heather, one would like the real one to be in new surroundings."

"I don't suppose it would much matter," said May; and then the guns came in sight.

One of them had found a piece of white heather, and he broke it in half and gave a piece to each of the girls. The London barrister stood on a knoll against the sky, and displayed his thin outline to disadvantage. Then the luncheon baskets were unpacked, and they all sat on the heather and ate and drank, and the dogs lay at a respectful distance.

May felt a little out of it among the talk and the laughter. It was so long since she had taken part in such scenes. She felt supremely happy, but, if it must be confessed, a bit of a pretender. These people all imagined her one of themselves—a girl with a happy home and a girl's life of irresponsible pleasure. Of course they didn't in the least care, but this was what they imagined; the casual things they said to her betrayed it. Sybil held a little court; this life all belonged to her, she took it as her due. May, looking at her small, pert cousin, sitting there in her tailor-made frock and her little gaitered feet, wondered if it were possible that she was only a year younger than herself. And then the luncheon baskets were packed again, and Holmes and Sybil's brothers carried them back to the governess - cart, and Holmes

announced his intention of returning with the ladies if there were room for him, and the cart went back very much worse trimmed than it had gone; and Sybil was extremely cross for no perceptible reason.

The days glided by very pleasantly and terribly fast, as they are apt to do when we are happy. All the people in the house amused May. She dropped naturally into the mood of a spectator, and was quietly thankful that the play was not a burlesque. It was very evident that the London barrister was paying leisurely and well-regulated court to her little cousin Sybil. Of Sybil's own feelings she could not judge. The young lady was by no means of a stable temper: she was by turns vivacious, irritable, and dull. May gathered from a conversation with her aunt that the scheme had the family approval, and this in itself, she considered, was enough to set Sybil the wilful against it.

The one of the party whom May most often found herself with, and whom she came to regard with that amount of admiration which an enthusiastic girl accords to an elder woman who is fascinating and who shows a liking for her, was the Hon. Mrs Paul. Somehow, even in her thoughts, May found herself giving this lady the full benefit of her prefix. It

seemed to suit her. It gave length to the name, which would otherwise have been wanting: and Mrs Paul was a tall, distinguished - looking, elegant woman, whose every movement was graceful and harmonious, and whose clothes, even to May's somewhat uninitiated eyes, suggested themselves as perfect to each detail, and whose manners, easy, as of one accustomed to live perpetually in the world, and gracious, as of one who had never been in a situation requiring an ungracious demeanour, were inexpressibly soothing and delightful to May Heathcote. Her worldliness was so perfect as to be artistic, and never offended. Under it she had a good heart, just as, behind her long tortoiseshell eyeglasses, she had excellent eyes, which could have seen perfectly without such aid; and yet the long tortoiseshell eyeglasses had become as much a part of her as were her eyes. Her face was not handsome, and yet she could never be passed unnoticed; nor did one feel her intense interest in dress to be misplaced. Mrs Paul never read, which is a negative womanliness too little cultivated nowadays. Her book was Society, spelt with a capital "S," and she knew it as well as the Scottish divine knows his Bible. It is true that she may have occasionally employed a

spare hour over a novel, from the French shelf in the library; but this pastime was conducted in the privacy of her own room.

Mrs Paul had no children of her own, and vet she had not allowed her affections to run out in the direction of a fancy dog, for which it is to be hoped she will receive due credit when our sins of omission and commission are known. Nor was she spiteful to the innocent daughters of other people. On the contrary, she had very definite notions on the subject of the up-bringing of girls, their duties and their spheres-oh! such easy duties, and such delightfully oldspheres! — contained within fashioned circuit of the drawing-room walls. notions were instilled frequently into the matronly mind of Mrs Mostyn, and their outcome could always be detected by the wary Sybil, and the relations between her aunt and herself were, in consequence, a little strained. Sybil was a wilful little lady, who had all her gowns from Paris, and declined interference. In May Mrs Paul found a most devoted listener; and to her, during mild saunters along heathery paths, she imparted her views of men and matters—views that were not in keeping with the scenery. Mrs Paul knew everything, from the way to promote a faint pink tinge under the transparency of a filbert nail, to the greatest social and religious problems of life—the problems dealt with in modern fiction. All these things Mrs Paul learnt and knew, but what Mrs Paul thought was never transmitted to her face.

"Not to translate her thoughts into gestures and facial contortions is the first thing a lady has to learn," Mrs Paul was wont herself to observe, "if she be going to mix much in society; and the second thing is to be able to look deeply interested in what is being said to her—especially if it be a man who is talking to her about himself."

Mr Holmes talked a good deal about himself in a languid voice, as if he were rather tired of the subject, but did not mind obliging you. Sybil had not learnt the golden rule: her little pink and white face, with its pale blue eyes and the elaborately arranged red hair, could look desperately bored at times; but Holmes was shortsighted. Many men are.

CHAPTER V

VISITORS came and visitors went at Strathalloch, and May was happy, and recked not of the passing of time nor of the unstable nature of her release from home, except at such moments

as the post-bag brought her a letter which recalled the old life and the horror of it.

Mr Holmes still remained, and appeared to be permanently established, though his suit made no progress that May could see. He seemed to expect to win what he wanted by sheer dint of accustoming the lady to his correct and insipid presence. It was certainly his best chance.

Mrs Paul also remained. She and May were by this time great friends.

"I fancy when you are in town you read a great many good books from Mudie's, and visit picture galleries and museums and places of that kind?" she asked the girl one day, regarding her with interest.

"Why do you think so, Mrs Paul?" May said.

"Because you have such an intelligent expression, my dear. I have noticed girls who do that kind of thing get very intelligent faces. It is extremely becoming."

May tried not to look amused. She could never quite fathom Mrs Paul.

"I wish I were intelligent," she said sadly. She had been thinking that morning, when Sybil had been confiding to her a design for a winter ball wrap, that she must resume the old scheme of finding a post for herself as

governess or lady-companion, for that she could never abandon herself to the home surroundings again. It had occurred to her that her aunt, among her many friends, might be able to help her to such a situation; but she shrank from mentioning it: she knew they would all be amazed and incredulous, and that her request would reveal too much. Mrs Mostyn had always maintained a discreet silence regarding May's family. This, with its implied blame on her mother, May rather resented, while at the same time she was relieved by it. She longed to boldly plunge into the subject with her aunt, and yet she felt she could not even skirt the matter without gaining still more blame for her mother and her brother. And so she let it all alone, and read her letters in private. Her aunt was excessively kind to her, but there was a great barrier between them. The gentle English matron, with her plaited grey hair and her soft peach-bloom cheeks, was out of sympathy with the sort of trouble that had come into May's life. Mr Mostyn was kind, too, in his way; but he did not pay young people much attention. He was a devoted sportsman, and his talk turned ever on the same subject. Dainty Sybil, May reluctantly had to own to herself, was heartless and shallow. Altogether, by the time the

pheasants' turn was approaching, and the heather had taken the tints of death on the hillside, and the mountain ash had blazed into scarlet beside the noisy, swollen burn, May felt that, had she had a home, she would be beginning to get home-sick.

"Sir Kenneth Forbes is coming to-night," remarked Sybil, entering the morning-room, where Mrs Paul and May were sitting.

"What Forbes is that?" asked Mrs Paul with interest; "one of the Forbeses of Phayre?"

"Sir Kenneth Forbes of Castle Hay," replied Sybil, with studied nonchalance.

"Castle Hay?—Castle Hay?—Never heard of them," replied her aunt.

"It's not them, it's him. He's the only one," answered Sybil.

She was evidently in an ill-humour, and she went restlessly about the room, touching the things on the various tables, and finally pressing her little nose against the window pane, and looking out at the autumnal scene. It was rather windy outside, and an occasional blast shook down a shower of leaves from the trees, and swirled them about on the avenue.

"How cold it is!" exclaimed Sybil, and came to the fire, threw on another log, and sat down on a stool on the hearthrug with her

back to the flames, and became lost in thought. Her aunt watched her for some time, and then took up a copy of *Black and White* from a table near, and began to cut it with an ivory paper-cutter. May, glancing up and seeing Sybil idle, laid down her work.

- "Who did you say was coming to-night?" she asked.
 - "A Sir Kenneth Forbes."
- "What is he like?" asked May, coming near the fire too.
- "He has a place near here, but it is let. I don't think he can afford to keep it up. He is literary."
 - "Literary?"
- "Yes; he is writing a book, or reading a book, or illustrating a book, or something. He is coming for a week."

May had letters to write in her own room after luncheon. She heard the rattle of wheels up the avenue, and then voices in the hall, and shortly afterwards the tea-gong sounded. She sealed and stamped her letters, and went downstairs with them in her hand. Slipping them into the letter-box on the hall table as she passed, she stepped across the carpeted hall and opened the drawing-room door. The new guest had arrived, and was standing, clad in travelling tweeds, on the hearthrug, with his

back to the fire, and a cup of tea in his hand, and talking to the ladies grouped round him. All the other men were out on the moors.

May had somehow expected an elderly man, from Sybil's description; but the man before her, who stopped talking and looked up as she came in, was very young—almost boyish—in appearance.

"Sir Kenneth Forbes—my niece, Miss Heathcote," said Mrs Mostyn; and they glanced at one another with that amount of interest one gives to a person who is to be a fellow-guest for a week, and then Forbes went over to Sybil's tea-table and took May's cup from her hands.

"How is your book getting on?" asked Mrs Paul, when the conversation flagged.

Forbes looked at her quickly, and appeared confused.

"My book?—My book? Oh—how did you know about my book?"

Mrs Paul leant back in her chair and regarded him indulgently.

"Of course one knows about your book," she said. "Tell us how it is getting on. It is not a secret, I suppose?"

Sybil and May interchanged glances of wonder. Mrs Paul could only have heard what Sybil had imparted that morning, and she had appeared lost in a fashion-plate at the time. But Mrs Paul had learned the art of being agreeable.

"No, it's not a secret," said Forbes, ingenuously. "It's an edition de luxe of one of our lesser-known Scottish poets. It is wonderful how ignorant English people are about them."

"I find Burns very hard to read myself," remarked Mrs Mostyn.

"Oh, Burns!—yes!" replied Sir Kenneth. "Mine is worse. He is a fifteenth-century man."

Both Mrs Mostyn and Mrs Paul racked their memories for some moments, and failed.

"Is it to be illustrated?" asked Mrs Paul. But Sir Kenneth was not to be led to talk of himself.

"Yes," he replied diffidently. "It is interesting work; but I don't know that any one will be specially grateful for it when it comes out. And what sort of sport have they been having, Mrs Mostyn? I have had only one day this autumn." And so the talk became general.

Sir Kenneth proved a pleasant addition to the house-party. He was a great athlete, he was a keen sportsman, and moreover he had a sunny, genial way with him that made everything go well. Before two days had passed, he and May became friends: of Sybil he appeared a little afraid. May, looking from Forbes—full of life and energy and nerve and interests—to Holmes, with his dry, parched, legal manner, and his hair getting somewhat scarce on his temples, wondered if Sybil did not find the latter a little dull and wooden. She felt, however, that she was doing only her duty, when the four young people were together, in acquiescing in Sir Kenneth's falling to her share, little suspecting that this habitual arrangement was arousing such a passion of anger and jealousy in her small cousin as would, converted into motive force, have run a goods train for a mile and a half.

- "Weren't you at Oxford?" May asked Sir Kenneth once, when they were out together.
 - "Yes," he said.
 - "When did you leave?"
 - "A little over two years ago."
- "That is just when my brother left. What was your college?"
 - "Magdalen. Which was your brother's?"
- "Wadham. But it is not likely you ever met. He was not a reading man," and May laughed. Forbes laughed too. He liked the imputation that he was.
- "Heathcote," he repeated, "Heathcote of Wadham—yes, I believe I did meet him once

or twice. I knew a man Lumsden at Wadham, and I used to meet Heathcote in his rooms—a tall man with a big moustache?"

"Yes," said May, "that is Reginald, and I've heard him talk of Mr Lumsden."

"What has become of your brother now, Miss Heathcote?" asked her companion.

May's face fell.

"He is married!" she said. But Sir Kenneth did not realise the full horror of the fate.

"By Jove! how old it makes one feel," he remarked. "But your brother always looked old for his age, with that big moustache of his."

There was a note of boyish envy in the last words that made May smile; and then their conversation turned to other subjects, with the pleasant sense that they had something of a common past.

They talked of Oxford, and its colleges and cliques. May knew it only in its festal dress—a mere bird's-eye view taken in an "Eights" week. Sir Kenneth, she found, knew it very differently. He was intimate with all the old colleges and churches, their architecture, their associations, their windows, their tapestry. He had evidently spent long hours rambling about and making himself acquainted with the place, and he had apparently brought an intelligent eye and a well cultivated mind with him to bear

upon what he saw. He told May of the men who had influenced Oxford. He spoke of Arnold and Newman, and their effect on the Oxonians of their time. And then he gave her a humorous, but not unkindly, picture of the modern society there, its narrowness and self-sufficiency.

"The two things that have spoiled it," he said ruefully, "are the married Don and the Summer Meeting. They are both terrible vandalisms. The Summer Meeting comes and goes when we are all down; that is considerate of it; but it leaves its traces, just as a picnic party leaves bits of paper and corks. But the married Don and his wife are to be met wheeling a double perambulator up the Woodstock Road any Sunday afternoon."

"I should like to go there again," said May. "We were there only a week, my father and I, the first term that Reginald was there—seven years ago now."

"Yes, you should get your father to take you again," said Sir Kenneth.

"My father — he is dead!" said May quickly, with a little catch of pain in her voice.

Sir Kenneth became grave at once.

"I am so sorry," he said softly. It was the conventional thing to say, but May felt

soothed. No one spoke to her of her father now.

There was a pause, and Sir Kenneth looked down for a moment's space at the girl at his side.

"We went to the river every day to watch the races," she said quickly, wishing to relieve his embarrassment. "And we went to a good many luncheon parties and tea parties in the colleges, with Reginald's friends. But, of course, we did not know many of the residents."

"No," said Sir Kenneth. "I have got to know more of them since I left college than I did when I was there."

"Do you live in Oxford now, then?" she asked.

"Oh no, but I often go there, to hunt up things in the Bodleian. I don't live anywhere. My place is let."

"Is that Castle Hay?" asked May. "I think it sounds so pretty."

Sir Kenneth laughed. "Oh no," he said. "Don't doom me to live in my paternal acres! I should catch such fearful rheumatism! Castle Hay verily deserves its name, for it is a ruined bit of wall in the very middle of a hay-field!"

It was in this pleasant, simple, and friendly fashion, among the fading heather and the tawny bracken, that these two learnt to know each other. They builded better than they knew.

CHAPTER VI

It was a wet day; one of those hopeless downpours that come in the Highlands, when the hills are wrapped in folds and wreaths of mist, and the grass in front of the windows is inches deep in water, and the ladies of the family bring out large stock pieces of embroidery and meshes of coloured silks, and the men moon about disconsolately.

In the morning-room a bright fire was blazing, and most of the party were gathered there. Sybil had got out her banjo, and was putting its strings and ribands in order. Holmes stood by, watching her darkly. In his secret soul he loathed the banjo; but when one is on the war-path one has to be civil to dogs and musical instruments and cats and various obnoxious things. Mr Holmes, being a man of the world, realised this; and so he stood by, asking intelligent questions regarding the method of striking the instrument. He was looking particularly bald this morning, but his clothes and his manners were perfect. May lay back in her chair and wondered if Sybil did not find him dull. Then she glanced down at Sir Kenneth, who was sitting on a stool at her feet, with his strong brown hands clasped

round his knees, and his well-shaped head thrown a little back. He looked up, and their eyes met, and they both smiled. Sybil drew her hand across the strings of her banjo.

"I can't tune it to-day!" she exclaimed petulantly, and tossed it into a chair. Mr Holmes looked decidedly relieved, and politely took it, and stood it in a very distant corner.

"I suppose the weather affects the strings," he remarked sympathetically, and no one took the trouble to answer him.

Then the luncheon gong sounded, and they all trooped in, glad of the occupation of eating.

"Well, I shall drive over to the Lough, Jane," said Mrs Mostyn to her sister, "and call on the Grants. You may as well come with me, and we'll leave the young people to amuse themselves."

"We are sure to find them in to-day, dear," remarked her sister plaintively, pecking at a piece of cold grouse.

"Yes, quite sure," replied Mrs Mostyn, cheerfully.

"And," observed a schoolboy brother, "if you fellows get tired of the girls' talk you can join Charlie and me in the gun-room."

Sybil and her mother both reprimanded him.

"Well, have you ever had to sit and listen to

two girls talking for hours at a time?" he enquired of Holmes, who looked embarrassed.

"The sweetest hours that e'er I spent, I spent among the lasses O,"

he replied gallantly, but with an accent that made Sir Kenneth smile.

"They talk of nothing but dress," the incorrigible continued, addressing Sir Kenneth confidentially. "Suppose when two fellows got together they sat and gazed earnestly into one another's faces, and said—'Shall I let out my waistcoat at the side seams and take it in at the waist?'—and 'Do you advise me, dear, to put flounces round my tweed trousers?'—by the hour together. It's quite true: I've heard them do it."

Mrs Paul looked reflectively at the speaker, and then she turned to her sister.

"Are the Grants dressy people, Ellen?" she asked, "for to-day is a terrible day to take out crape. I cannot make out why it is that Paris crape wears so much better than English crape. That bonnet I got in Paris in June, the veil is quite presentable yet; and my London one is twice the length it was originally, and so heavy! It takes me fully half an hour to pin it into my hair so as to get the weight off; and yet one doesn't like to cut it. I shall get all my crape from Paris after this."

"May we get up?" asked the schoolboys, with disgusted expressions. But the bonnet discussion was resumed in the hall before the ladies drove away.

Often afterwards May remembered that wet afternoon. Sybil was in high spirits, and made them all play battledore and shuttlecock in the hall; and then they practised plantation songs with the discarded banjo, and Sir Kenneth improvised a drum out of a battledore, and Holmes played feelingly on a comb wrapped round with cigarette papers, and stood in a most legal attitude with one foot on the bar of a chair, one hand behind an imaginary gown, and the other brandishing the comb.

"I believe we are all fey," murmured Sir Kenneth to May.

"Oh, don't say such horrid things," she said.

"Ah, you understand my native language?" he answered, looking down at her.

And then the sound of carriage wheels was heard, and Holmes hastily slipped the comb into his pocket, and they gathered round the tea-table before the ladies entered.

"Oh, my dear, I feel so faint! I have had such a shock! My nerves are quite shaken!" said Mrs Paul, sinking down into a chair, and arranging her veil on one shoulder.

"What is the matter. Aunt?"

"Oh, my dear! there was another widow there!"

"Well, I don't see anything so very bad in that," said Sybil unfeelingly.

Mrs Paul half-closed her eyes. "If you regarded dress as much as I do, Sybil," she replied,—"made such a definite study of the art of dress, you would realise what it is to see another woman approach you, clad from top to toe exactly the same as yourself. Thank you, Mr Holmes," and she took a cup of tea from his sympathetic hands.

"It was Mrs Feldar-Amos," remarked Mrs Mostyn explanatively. She had long since given up trying to understand her sister-in-law.

"I assure you I have often," Mrs Paul continued, addressing Holmes, who instantly assumed the air of respectful attention peculiar to the counsel for the defence, "turned aside into a shop or a picture gallery, or anywhere, in order to avoid meeting—another widow. I have an artistic horror of duplicates."

When they all went upstairs to dress for dinner, May came to the door of Mrs Paul's room with her, to carry her long driving cloak, which she had thrown off downstairs.

"Come in, my dear," the elder lady said, as she took her cloak from May at the door.

"We have plenty of time. Come in and see my photographs." May followed her in, glancing with admiration at the gold-topped fittings on the dressing-table, and breathing the odour of violets, that was faintly perceptible over everything. But Mrs Paul did not show her the photographs. Her eyes fell on a letter lying on the outside of her blotter on the writing-table, and she took it up with a look of annoyance.

"Ah, I should have answered this before," she said, turning it over in her thin white hands. "This is from a friend of mine who is going abroad all alone, and wants some young cheerful girl to go with her, as a sort of companion. I suppose you don't happen to know of any impoverished young lady who wants a situation like that?" she added carelessly. May started, and the blood came into her cheeks.

"Oh Mrs Paul, yes! I want one!" she exclaimed impulsively.

Mrs Paul turned with a languid smile; and then she saw that the girl was in earnest. She was too well bred to allow even the first spasm of surprise to show itself. "Mrs Evelegh is a dear friend of mine—a school friend—but she is very difficile. I should not envy her companion," she said, to gain time.

But May had already repented her impetuous speech. She had no right to ask favours of Mrs Paul while staying in her aunt's house. She had spoken to no one about it yet. She ought to have spoken to her aunt first. Her aunt might be very angry. She had put Mrs Paul into a difficult position.

"Oh, I ought not to have said anything, Mrs Paul!" she exclaimed nervously. "Of course, you probably do not think me suitable."

"Yes, I daresay you would suit beautifully," said Mrs Paul slowly, "but Mrs Evelegh is an invalid, my dear. She is going abroad, and wants some one to go with her at once. Does your aunt know of this project?"

"No," said May, nervously fingering a silver button-hook half a yard long.

"Have you thought of it seriously yourself, Miss Heathcote? Do your relations know?"

"Oh yes! my mother does. You see, Mrs Paul," she added hastily, trying to shield her mother from the blame that she felt would be accorded to her, "it is not—not as a means to—to live; but my mother is married again—at least, I mean——" she stopped, blushing painfully, and feeling that she was telling tales to a comparative stranger.

"Yes, I see," replied Mrs Paul, with a cold far-away look in her eyes. "Nowadays, girls

so often do these things. But Mrs Evelegh is of a difficile temper."

At this moment Mrs Paul's maid knocked at the door, and entered, and began noiselessly laying out her mistress's dress.

May turned to go.

"Don't think any more about it, please," she murmured, "I ought not to have said anything; only I have tried so often through the newspapers, and always failed; and when you spoke it seemed——"

"Providential," Mrs Paul said smiling, and shutting the door after her.

May went to her room feeling mortified. "I must tell Aunt Ellen at once," she thought.

But the opportunity did not arrive till next day, and by that time Mrs Paul had already broached the subject herself to her sister-inlaw. She was curious about the girl.

Mrs Mostyn's indignation knew no bounds.

"It is shameful!" she said. "Positively shameful! To think of poor Harry's daughter being so treated! I wonder what he would have felt! But the mother was always eccentric and selfish, and thought more of her own likes and dislikes than of her children's well-being. I believe she approves of girls leaving their homes, and wearing men's clothes, and all that kind of thing."

- "May dresses very nicely," her sister-inlaw said thoughtfully.
- "But all their troubles began with that second marriage," Mrs Mostyn went on, the pent-up indignation of years breaking out. "It was an insult to poor dear Harry's memory. I believe it was simply vanity that made her do it, and a sort of inertness. I am told he had asked her about a dozen times."
 - "Yes, it is wearing," owned the other lady.
- "But fancy a woman like that, with a good position in the county, and grown-up children! And now that the son has married, too, I am truly sorry for May."
- "Ah, then it is trouble, and not books and pictures, that gives her her spirituelle expression," murmured Mrs Paul. "I often notice that grief purifies the faces of the young, and is very becoming; whereas, with older women, it produces wrinkles. I am sometimes inclined to wish that my own troubles had come to me earlier in life," sighed the widow.

Her sister-in-law looked at her earnestly without listening.

- "I always hoped May would marry," she said.
- "Yes," replied Mrs Paul, with instant attention; and then the two ladies looked at one another, and Mrs Mostyn laughed gently.

A MOULTED FEATHER

"When she told me of this project, I confess I thought it might be that she wished to leave us," Mrs Paul said, after a pause; "but it appears she has had it in her mind for some time. She spoke of having advertised in the newspapers."

Mrs Mostyn flushed with vexation.

"Of course I shall be delighted to write to Mrs Evelegh if you wish it," Mrs Paul continued blandly. "If she is determined to carry out her project, she could find no better situation. Edith Evelegh is wealthy, well-connected, travels a good deal. She is a little querulous, poor dear. Her nerves have been severely worked upon since we were schoolgirls together."

"It is very kind of you," said Mrs Mostyn absently. "Perhaps you would not write to your friend till I have spoken to May."

"And when are we going to hear news from Sybil?" asked Mrs Paul, with an inscrutable smile on her lips.

But Mrs Mostyn felt she had talked gossip enough for one forenoon; and, besides, she was not going to discuss her daughter. She dreaded getting into trouble with that daughter afterwards, if she did.

"Oh, I don't know," she said carelessly. "Sybil must manage her own affairs."

Mrs Paul raised her eyebrows. She disapproved of any girl managing her own affairs.

"Sybil ought to marry," she said decidedly, "she is not suited for an old maid."

"Oh, Sybil will not be an old maid!" replied the mother hastily and with dignity. Mrs Paul looked at her sister-in-law through halfclosed eyelids, and smiled her little inscrutable smile.

"I have never had a daughter," she said, "but I can imagine mothers feeling like that. It is very natural—it is like a father wanting his son to enter the same profession as himself. How curious it is," she added, examining the bracelet on her wrist, "that people constantly regard an unmarried woman as a woman who has failed; whereas she usually symbolises the fact that man has failed."

Mrs Mostyn looked rather vaguely at her sister-in-law.

May had a troubled little interview with her aunt, in which each sought to avoid unpleasant references, and neither, in consequence, said exactly what she meant to say, and May felt that her aunt disapproved of her, and yet the poor girl was too loyal to justify herself.

And then the letter was written, recommending May for the post, and May went about feeling that everything had changed, that she was quite on another footing, but that her future was provided for.

"It is what I have always wished—I ought to be glad," she said to herself wistfully.

But she was not glad.

CHAPTER VII

THE weather had broken; the avenue and lawn were strewn with dead leaves; the hoar frost lay thick on grass and shrubs in the early mornings; and Sir Kenneth Forbes, having extended the original limit of his visit from one week to three, was leaving for the south next day.

Mrs Evelegh had engaged May, on Mrs Paul's recommendation. The salary was nominal; but all May's travelling expenses were to be paid, and May was thankful that the post took her out of the country. Mrs Mostyn maintained an attitude of patient sadness on the subject, and Sybil appeared incredulous but uninterested. May had written to her mother to tell her, and was now preparing to go home in order to get her things ready, so that she might join her employer at the beginning of November. They were going straight to Italy, where Mrs Evelegh intended to winter.

May had not seen much of Sir Kenneth for the last two days. The men had been out shooting a good deal, and there were several lady guests who took up the girls' time, among them a stout French lady, a former governess of Sybil's. A sort of dulness hung over everything, as if the end had come. The heather was all dead, and the trees on the hillside were splendid with the brilliance of decay. Somehow, without our being exactly conscious of it, the fall of the year affects our spirits. Our lives are much too short, and we are constantly being pulled up, in our little schemes and happinesses and griefs, by a reminder of the fact.

The morning that Sir Kenneth was to leave was fine and frosty and clear. The French ex-governess was going too; and Sybil, who had not been over-civil to her during her visit, was making it up by seeing her off at the station. Every one came out after breakfast and stood about the front door, shivering, to see the travellers depart. The French lady came downstairs, a curious bundle of shawls and veils. While she was making prolonged French adieux to Mrs Mostyn and Mrs Paul, and while Sybil was keeping every one waiting, Sir Kenneth came up to May Heathcote, where she stood a little apart from the others.

"Miss Heathcote," he said, "don't ask me to consider this as good-bye, because I won't. I want to finish our argument about James Lee's wife—you were very hard on her. May I come and see you? Would your mother let me call when I am in London?"

May looked up in sudden utter consternation at the boyish, friendly face gazing down at her so hopefully. A vision of her stepfather in his tasselled cap and velvet coat—of her untidy, miserable home—flashed across the girl's mind.

"Oh no!" she said, unconsciously shrinking from him. "Oh no, please not!—please don't!"

His whole face changed to one of blank dismay.

May recalled herself.

"I don't mean to be inhospitable," she said, with a nervous laugh, "but I am afraid—I shall be away!"

"Oh, I don't want to come if you are to be away," he said bluntly. "But, Miss Heathcote, you do not mean that our friendship is to end here?" He looked at her miserably, and May sought for an answer and could find none.

"Is that not a little cruel?" he added, in a voice that suddenly made her heart stand still.

"Well, you have fine weather for your journey!" said Mr Mostyn's hearty tones

behind them, as he joined the group, People have such an awkward habit of interrupting.

Sybil came out at that moment, with a big tweed cape on, and buttoning her thick gloves. It was then discovered that the French lady's reticule was left upstairs, and one of the boys was sent to fetch it, while Mr Mostyn consulted his watch and became fidgety.

"Sybil, I have been so rude to Sir Kenneth," May managed to say to her cousin.

Sybil looked interested.

- "How?" she asked.
- "He—he asked if he might call in London—it was quite natural, after having been here, you know."
 - "Quite," Sybil replied dryly.
- "And I just said no, that I should be away. It was so abrupt and discourteous when he was so nice and friendly, and then your father came up and I hadn't time to explain. Do tell him about—that I am going away as a companion."
- "Yes, I will!" said Sybil hastily, as the missing reticule appearing, she joined the others, and then the two travellers and she drove off.

When the carriage reached the bend in the avenue and disappeared, the group at the door turned and went indoors again. Mrs Paul was examining the hem of her white crape streamers.

"It is disastrous to be standing out here in the morning mist," she said. "Miss Heathcote, if ever you have the misfortune to wear attire of this kind, do remember to get your crape from Paris."

Sybil's opportunity of righting her friend came very soon, for the voluble French woman was going further north to pay another visit, and her train started eight minutes before Sir Kenneth's, and so Sir Kenneth and Sybil were left together on the little country platform after they had seen her off.

It was Sir Kenneth who began the conversation.

"What does your cousin, Miss Heathcote, mean by saying she is not to be at home next winter?" he asked, as they paced together under the advertisements of soaps and blackleads and whiskies. Sybil gazed straight in front of her.

"Oh, I suppose she means that she will be married," she replied. Sir Kenneth was silent for a moment.

"Is she engaged, then?" he asked presently, in a hard voice.

"I don't know that it is settled exactly," answered Sybil. "Indeed, I believe she is going abroad first. Perhaps that was what she meant. But she is going to marry—a man

old enough to be her grandfather, but very rich."

Sir Kenneth Forbes laughed harshly.

"What is his name?" he asked.

"I don't really know," replied Sybil carelessly—which was true. May, in a weak firelit moment, had confided to her cousin the strange episode concerning Mr Hardy, but had of course omitted his name.

And then Sir Kenneth's train steamed in, and Sybil shook hands with him, and left him.

"So that explains it!" he exclaimed to himself, as he threw himself back in a corner of a smoking carriage.

The train sped on through the fading highlands, past bleak moorlands and rocky-bedded torrents: past thatched hovels and meagre farms. The mists lay over everything; and the telegraph wires along the line rose and fell rhythmically.

When Sybil returned home she said nothing to May, who was too shy and too proud to resume the subject.

May left early the following week. Every one was very kind to her at the last, and she had a large straw basket of game for her mother added to her luggage. Mrs Paul seemed to regard the girl as now in some degree her own peculiar property. She kissed

her at parting, which was unusual, for Mrs Paul was not by nature demonstrative; and she gave her her card, "in case you should forget my address," she said. "For, remember, dear, I shall want you to come and see me when you return to town. And write and tell me how you get on. Oh, Mrs Evelegh is diffictle, poor dear! but you are so sweet-tempered, you cannot fail to soothe her. And when she is in one of her nervous states, just keep out of her way."

"But that is not what a 'companion' is supposed to do," exclaimed poor May ruefully.

"Well, no," Mrs Paul assented. "But, any-how, come and see me when you return to England; and I fancy you will find I am not the only one who has not forgotten your sweet face," and the lady smiled one of her inscrutable and meaning smiles, and May was foolish enough to feel comforted by the speech, when she remembered it afterwards.

CHAPTER VIII

It was early summer in Switzerland. The hotels, of which Switzerland is mainly composed, were empty. The portiers sat idly in their boxes; the younger waiters were being

trained, before the season began, in the art of table-setting, and moved noiselessly down the long length of the salles-à-manger, arranging the silver and the cutlery, the serviettes and the plates of fruits and fancy biscuits, and the vases of flowers, for the guests who never came. Upstairs in the corridors the sun-blinds were shut, and the Swiss chambermaids, in their high white caps, sat on straw chairs beside their little tables, and nodded over their knitting, and waited for the electric bells which never sounded. Outside, the peasant men, in their blue blouses, walked about under umbrellas: and women. with black eyebrows and collarless dresses exposing thick white throats, hurried chattering along the hot streets; and stout men, with bad cigars between their lips, elbowed their way about, to the detriment of the foreign character for civility; and an occasional priest, black and dusty, mingled in the crowd. Far in the distance, if one stood on the broad bridge crossing the Rhone, and braved for an instant the danger of sunstroke, one could see the white tip of Mont Blanc among the pink clouds.

May Heathcote and her employer, Mrs Evelegh, had arrived the night before at Geneva from Italy, and had put up at the Metropole, opposite the "English Garden."

Mrs Evelegh was still resting in her room; but May, having flung back her wooden blinds and drunk in the view of the lake from her window, had stolen downstairs, and was now awaiting her morning coffee in the breakfast-room.

Mrs Evelegh and May, after seven months of daily companionship, had become very good friends. Mrs Evelegh had fulfilled Mrs Paul's prediction of being difficile; but May had got used to that. She was one of those ladies who, having been idle all their lives, get their nerves into the same lamentable state into which a fakir thinks it holy to get his muscles.

"My poor nerves are all outside of my body," she used repeatedly to assure May: and, of course, such an unprecedented state of things must be disturbing to the conservative arrangements of the rest of one's physiology.

Mrs Evelegh was, like her friend the Hon. Mrs Paul, a widow; but there the likeness between the friends began and ended. In the first place, Mrs Evelegh was a short lady, inclined to be stout, and she did not wear widow's weeds. On the contrary, she habitually appeared in a rather ill-made blue serge skirt and a loose blue silk blouse, relieved from conventionality by a very large antique silver buckle, and a queer silver necklet, which

ornaments she was never seen without. In spite of her attire, and the travelling hat with the gauze veil that crowned her rather sallow little face, with its piercingly dark eyes, there was something about Mrs Evelegh that showed immediately that she was accustomed to claim a full share of attention and distinction. She had taken a great fancy to May, which, to May's affectionate nature, more than made up for her occasional querulousness.

When May had finished her coffee and rolls, and ignored the inevitable dish of liquid honey, she went upstairs again to Mrs Evelegh's room.

"Shall I go to the *poste restante*, and see if there are any letters?" she asked.

"Yes, do," said Mrs Evelegh, "though I don't see how there can be. You could tell the porter to go, but I daresay you would like the walk before the heat of the day. Don't hurry back; I have letters to write. If you are in for luncheon it will do."

It was one of Mrs Evelegh's strongest emotions that she would not give in to any foreign customs that she could avoid. She called *dejeuner* "luncheon," and she drank coffee only because foreign tea is execrable.

May put on her hat, took her parasol, got a calling-card of Mrs Evelegh's, asked the direction of the portier, and started to the post. It

was disappointing, after the walk across the broad, open bridge, and the weary climb up the scorching steps of the great staring new Post-Office, to see the man go slowly and deliberately through a fat bundle of letters, and then shake his head with a brief "Non, mademoiselle!"

Mrs Evelegh's constant changes of route made postal arrangements difficult; and, after all. May told herself, she did not look for much joy in the way of letters. In her secret heart she knew that she always hoped for a letter from her aunt, from Mrs Paul, from Svbil, with some news in it to connect her with the past. That happy time last autumn that seemed so far away now! As she walked along in the sunshine she thought it all overthought it threadbare, as she had so often done before. Had Sybil told him? Did he really Did he give her up because she was not like other girls-because she was an outcast from home? Would she never see him nor hear of him again? And then she found herself at the door of the hotel, and, remembering Mrs Evelegh's permission, sent up a message to tell her that there were no letters: then, turning to the left, she wandered up a side street, stopping to glance in at the shop windows at the expensive and ugly trifles put

to catch the eye of the tourist, and presently came to the older parts of the town—the Geneva of Knox and Calvin, hidden in dirt and misery and squalor close behind the great hotels and the gardens and the Rhone and the pleasure boats, and the tourist-ridden Geneva of to-day.

May had an English dislike of John Knox. She did not know much about him, except that he had made Queen Mary's life a burden to her, as did Elijah that of Jezebel; and that he had on several occasions caused the poor royal lady to "yowl." When she came out again from the dark, tortuous streets, with their high cheerless houses and narrow dirty entries, she felt as if she were leaving behind her a gloomy and sunless creed, and getting back again into a sunnier and more cheerful religion.

In the afternoon Mrs Evelegh and her companion went in one of the little pleasure steamers up the Lake of Geneva, as far as Nyon. Mrs Evelegh sat with her feet on a camp-stool, and a large umbrella up, and desired May to read aloud Baedeker to her. Madame de Stäel's house and Voltaire's chateau were discussed in turn, but Mrs Evelegh's nerves suffered because there were three villas all together, any of which might have been Byron's.

"And I am a great reader of Byron," she explained in an injured tone. "He was the poet of my youth."

She sent May to ask one of the sailors, and May went very unwillingly, having doubts as to whether Byron had been the poet of his youth. But when she returned, uninformed, the villas had been left far astern, and Mrs Evelegh's versatile mind was engaged in speculating whether afternoon tea would be procurable on board, and May was sent to find that out.

Mrs Evelegh's nerves never stood in the way of physical fatigue if Mrs Evelegh felt inclined to undertake it; and so, after an interminable table d'hôte, at which, it being still early in the year, they were the only English present, she announced to May her intention of going out in a pleasure boat on the lake.

"Let us start at once," she said. "I daresay we can get a respectable sailor and a clean, dry boat. At any rate, we neither of us have on anything that will spoil."

It was an irritating habit of Mrs Evelegh's constantly to cheerfully assert this when May had on her very best attire.

They found a sailor with a scarlet sash and a flannel shirt, and they skimmed out in a little boat, with a Chinese lantern swinging from the

point of the bow, into the great Bay of Geneva. The summer night was long in getting dark; but as soon as dusk set in all the little boats lit their lanterns, and darted about like so many fire-flies, and the big hotels set round the bay sent up noisy fireworks, and above them all the stars came out in the dark blue sky, and twinkled down with pale and scornful superiority. They rowed right across to where the sailing boats were harboured, their highpointed double sails looking like quill pens stuck into an office ink-pot. Then, with leisurely strokes, the boatman took them across to the other side of the bay, and drifted about. resting lazily on his oars. The other little boats flashed past them, and the rockets on the shore spluttered up into the darkness, and broke into coloured sparks against the starry sky.

"Is it all done for our amusement?" said May, looking round at the scene.

"Yes, for the tourists, I suppose," Mrs Evelegh answered.

"Is it as beautiful here in winter?" May asked the young boatman.

"No, miss," he answered sadly. "In winter it is very, very cold, and the hotels are all closed. The poor suffer much."

And May thought of her morning's walk and

the wretched poverty close behind the gaiety, and wondered if any of the pale-faced, dirty people of those slums ever walked a hundred yards from their wretched houses to look at this fairy scene; and, if they ever did, what they thought of it.

"Yes, it is beautiful; but I feel as if I had caught a cold. Could you find any lavender salts?" said Mrs Evelegh, as they entered their hotel again.

Next day they went to Vevey by boat, and drove thence to Chillon, and visited that grim and romantic ruin standing at the edge of the opal lake, a gaunt remnant of mediæval misery. May had been desired to read aloud Byron's very inefficient verses on Bonivard to Mrs Evelegh in the morning, and that lady was more interested in the poet's name scratched on a pillar in the vault than in anything else—Bonivard included.

At the end of a week they found themselves up among the glaciers at Mürren. It was May's first view of the glaciers, and she sat for hours on the wooden verandah of the Hotel des Alpes, gazing at the wonderful range. There was a telescope on the verandah, and groups of people were vainly endeavouring to see the chamois on the dark hill-side opposite, that looked so near, but that yet was miles

away. The heat was intense; and there, perched up close to the sky, no shade was possible. Mrs Evelegh's nerves had been shaken, as well they might, by the ascent in the train.

"I am not accustomed to crawl up the side of a vertical precipice, regardless of the laws of gravitation," the little lady said, fanning herself indignantly. "And the terrible little train crept up so slowly! If it had gone quickly it would not have been so bad, but it went so cautiously it gave you the idea of danger. However, it is extraordinary when you get here. Fancy finding a whole village and four hotels where you would expect to meet only an eagle and a cloud!"

Long into the night May leant out of her window, watching the sheet lightning playing over the snowy peaks, as if all the stars had suddenly melted and overflooded the sky, and then crystallised back into their places again. The clouds rolled up out of the valley below, and crept about insidiously among the white peaks, till they wrapped them all round in mystic masses. Once a sound like a pistol-shot broke the weird silence—it was an avalanche somewhere on those lonely heights. May felt as if she were on the other side of things generally, and a strange sensation took possession of her as if something were going to

happen, and she should never reach the old familiar world below and find it the same that she had left it.

Next morning the weird feeling had left her. The sun was streaming into her room, and the sky smiled innocently and knew nothing whatsoever about sheet lightning. There was honest jam at breakfast instead of the omnipresent honey, and afterwards a waiter was discovered standing in the hall dispensing letters to an eager crowd gathered round him.

May joined the crowd. It was over a month since she had had any letters. She felt almost incredulous when the man handed her several, and thanked him with unnecessary warmth, and walked off examining them, followed by the envious glances of those who had got none.

"One, two, three,—four for Mrs Evelegh. Two for me. One from Joan, one from—I don't know that hand. How many postmarks and re-directions! They must have been following us about for days."

She found Mrs Evelegh sitting at one of the little tables on the verandah, and handed her her letters. Then she took her own to a seat a little bit down the edge of the grassy, flowery slope, and sat down to enjoy them in comfort.

With woman-like curiosity she opened the one in the unknown handwriting first.

It was a lawyer's letter. Her old friend Mr Hardy had died; and he had left her, May Heathcote, the greater part of his wealth.

For half an hour she sat there trying to realise it, Joan's letter lying unheeded on her lap. She read the concise and legal phrases over and over, and then she gazed at the dazzling snow.

"Poor old Mr Hardy!" she murmured to herself. "And I can never thank him."

Then her eye fell on a four-leaved clover growing at her feet among the rich, flowery grass. She stooped and picked it. It was a very perfect one, and she put it into the lawyer's letter to keep it safe. It suggested to her another aspect of the matter.

"Yes, I suppose I am very fortunate," she thought. "It seems so sad to profit by the poor, kind old man's death. I shall be rich and independent. I needn't be a companion any longer. I am my own mistress. It solves it all." Then clearly in her mind came back his words to her: "In the natural course of events you will not long be troubled by me, and when I am gone you would then have wealth to enjoy yourself." Her lips trembled and her eyes filled. Death brings dignity and pathos with it.

To prevent herself from breaking down, she opened Joan's letter.

"Mr Dubrucq has sold two pictures," Joan wrote, "and he is going to take us all abroad. We are going to Paris and up the Rhine! Just fancy how splendid! Reginald and Milly are coming too. Milly is awfully keen about it. What fun if we should meet you! I am going to take my violin, because, perhaps, when we are in Germany, I could persuade mother to leave me at a conservatorium. If we do meet you, May, you might say a good word for me."

The letter went on for several pages, unconsciously giving May a glimpse back into the old turmoil that seemed so far behind. May skimmed it through, and put it back into its envelope. Yes, Joan should study at a con-She would do what she could servatorium. now for Joan. It was an excellent idea of the child's. And Reggie?-could she do nothing for him, the brother she loved so in spite of all his faults? May already felt herself a power, an heiress. She got up and walked slowly back to where she had left Mrs Evelegh, the lawyer's letter, with the four-leaved clover inside it, in her hand.

Mrs Evelegh was sitting with her own letters spread out on the table by her. She was in one of her somewhat trying moods,

"Oh, Miss Heathcote, here you are at last!" she exclaimed. "I really wish you would not wander away so that I do not know where to find you. You might consider that a person whose nerves are all outside, as mine are,

might be upset by letters. My letters are most upsetting! There's my favourite niece engaged to a man I never even met, and I always intended—but that is ever the way. And poor old 'Watch,' the dog at home, that I've had chained in his kennel in the court for the last fifteen years—and he was always so anxious to go out, and I had to say 'No, Watch, no!' and he looked so plaintive—he's dead! And how do I know how the servants have been treating him? And the Elliots write that they are at a charming little place on the Rhine-Rüdesheim-and they want me to join them, and I'm sure I don't know how to manage the journey. We should have to give up Lucerne, I suppose. And I certainly don't feel equal to packing."

May looked down at the flustered little lady who had been so kind to her, and she put the lawyer's letter into her pocket.

"I will find out about the route, Mrs Evelegh," she said, "and, of course, I can do all the packing. It will be very nice for you to meet friends, won't it? Will you come indoors? It is cool and shady in the reading-room, and the English papers must have come." The niece and the dog she wisely let alone.

Mrs Evelegh rose and came in, leaning on her companion's arm.

"And there is that terrible railway to go down in," she complained. "I don't know why we ever came up here, I am sure."

May glanced over her shoulder at the panorama. She would never forget Mürren.

And all that afternoon the newly-made heiress spent on her knees in front of Mrs Evelegh's boxes, laboriously packing. She went on with her humble duties as if nothing had happened, for fear of disturbing her employer. Her letter was in her pocket, and she kept her great news to herself.

CHAPTER IX

THE Hon. Mrs Paul sat alone in the drawing-room of the London house which she had taken for the season. The room was a mass of heavily-scented flowers, and the striped sunblinds were stretched outside the open windows, keeping the inside shady. The patter of the horses' feet on the wooden roads—that London sound!—was all that broke the stillness; and the Hon. Mrs Paul put up a thin white hand, laden with diamonds, to stifle a polite yawn as she sat alone by her little tea-table. She was, as usual, faultlessly attired in a robe of black

that fell in graceful folds round her as she leant back in her chair; and she wore a pale hothouse rose, as if to signify that summer had begun for everybody: but there was no one present to appreciate the delicate suggestion.

The door opened and the servant brought in a pile of new novels from Mudie's, and noiselessly arranged them on a table.

Mrs Paul watched him languidly. When the door had shut behind him she got up and turned the books over to see what had been sent. On the top of the heap lay a printed list, headed "New Publications." Mrs Paul took it, and walked across the room with it in her hand to consign it to the waste-paper basket that stood beside her writing-table. As she did so, her eye was arrested by a name on it, and she stood for a moment in the centre of the room, gazing at the printed paper. Then she turned and went back to her former seat by the teatable, still attentively considering the list.

"The Poems of Robert Henryson, edited and annotated by Sir Kenneth Forbes, Bart., with numerous illustrations. London: Barabbas & Son. Crown 8vo, 21s. 'A painstaking and critical edition.'—Spectator. 'A volume that should be in the hands of all students of Scottish lore.'—Athenaum."

Mrs Paul became lost in thought. Then she

went to her writing-table and wrote two notes. One was to her bookseller—Mrs Paul never employed postcards—ordering the *Poems of Henryson*, by Sir Kenneth Forbes. The other was to Sir Kenneth himself, and was directed to care of his publishers.

"Dear Sir Kenneth," it ran, "your book is simply charming. I feel quite proud to think I know the author. Are you in London? I am here for a mouth or so, and should so like to see you again and congratulate you on the great work, and talk about our friends of last autumn. Have you heard of my niece Sybil's engagement to Mr Holmes? You remember him, I daresay. I am at home almost any afternoon after five o'clock.—Yours sincerely, "IANE PAUL."

Mrs Paul disliked her Christian name and always signed it under protest, and looked disconsolately at it after it was written. She did so now, and then she read her note through again and smiled. Suddenly an after-thought made her take up the other note to the booksellers, and add the words "at once" after the order, and underscore them twice. Then she rang and sent both letters to the post.

Her note, forwarded by his publishers, found Sir Kenneth Forbes in Oxford. He had just been reading a very scathing review of his book in the *National Observer*, sent to him, unsolicited, by a press-cutting association; and he was not in the very best of tempers.

"I had much better turn to some form of literature that will make money," he said, restlessly pacing the room. "If I can't get a tenant for that place of mine I shall have to take to penny-a-lining and begin economies."

When Mrs Paul's letter arrived he read it twice through, thoughtfully. Then he went to the window, and looked out at the passers-by. There rose in his mind a picture of a stretch of misty moorland and a mass of heavy clouds. The footpath beneath his feet was strewn with broken quartz, and the red mud underlying the quartz was wet with recent rain. He felt the fresh wind on his face, and he heard the roar of the swollen burn as it fell over its rocky bed down the hillside.

Sir Kenneth was recalled to Oxford by the first chords of the voluntary for Vespers on a chapel organ close at hand.

"I must run up to London soon," he thought.

"I suppose she is married by now, poor girl!

... I shall anyhow be going to London.

... I don't think I care to go; I hate paying calls.

... I have nothing to take me to town this month.

I should like to hear about her. I couldn't have stood it a little while ago:

now.

Mrs Paul would be sure to mention her. I may as well say I will call, at any rate.

I needn't go when the time comes."

And so at the end of a week he found himself in Mrs Paul's drawing-room.

Mrs Paul rose to meet him. His book was on the table at her side, with a silver papercutter in it.

"Well, you are kinder than the reviews—some of them," he said, blushing under her praise.

"It is so true what you once said about our all being so ignorant of Scotch poetry, Sir Kenneth," she replied, her long delicate hands moving about among the cups on the tray at her side. "Do you know—I blush to confess it—I always thought 'Troilus and Cresseid' was Shakespeare! And we really ought to know our Bibles and our Shakespeares, whatever else we leave unknown. Will you light the flame under this kettle? I do like a spirit kettle and a tea-cosy at tea-time, and

"'The man that will not when he may, Shall have not when he wold.'

I have long wished to know where that came from. Oh, the book is sure to be a great success! And the pictures are charming! I have been showing it to all my friends, and they have been enchanted with it. But you must be tired of hearing its praises. Tell me, have you heard from or of my brother's family lately? And do you take sugar?"

"Yes-no!" replied her guest, with the result

that his tea was given to him very sweet, and he had to try to drink it without wincing.

"I met Mr Mostyn at the Club the other day, but he was just coming in as I was going out. He said his family weren't in town. I haven't seen them since—Strathalloch."

"No," replied Mrs Paul, putting out the spirit lamp, "Sybil is coming to stay with me presently, to get some of her things."

"Is the marriage to be soon?" the young man asked, with growing nervousness.

"October," replied Mrs Paul suavely. "There is no need for them to wait."

"And has—Miss Heathcote's marriage taken place yet?" Sir Kenneth asked. He felt as if any one must see through the studied carelessness of his question. His voice sounded strange to himself, and surely must betray him.

Mrs Paul started imperceptibly.

"I never heard of it!" she exclaimed.

Then the young man looked up, and his eyes met those of the woman opposite. He spoke eagerly, forgetful of his rôle of indifference.

"Miss Mo—I heard—I forget who told me—that she was going to be married to a man old enough to be her grandfather, but very rich. Wasn't it true?"

"It was a mistake," Mrs Paul replied. "I ought to know, for I was fortunate enough to

be able to be of service to her. She hasn't a very happy home. Her father was Mrs Mostyn's brother, you know. He was a kind, gentle-natured man: I remember him. May inherits many of her qualities from him. He died about five years ago."

"I know," said Sir Kenneth. He was leaning forward eagerly; but Mrs Paul seemed to notice nothing unusual in his interest, and went on calmly.

"Then her mother married again. I never met the mother. The second husband is not her equal socially, I believe—something quite impossible. The girl had such a pretty pathetic expression at times—I daresay you noticed it?—that was trouble, Sir Kenneth! She has gone abroad now, with a friend of mine as companion. Poor child! a hard life, I daresay, but she seemed to prefer it to being at home. I wonder if she has lost that expression?" Mrs Paul added regretfully.

Sir Kenneth was deep in thought. This explained it all—her refusal to let him come and see her—her saying she would be away. But why had Sybil Mostyn said she was going to be married? Her own cousin.—There must be some truth in it!

"And there is no possible likelihood in the story of her being engaged," Mrs Paul went

on, as if answering his unspoken thought, "for she was very frank to me, and I am sure she would have told me. Besides, would she have gone abroad?"

"Perhaps not," replied Sir Kenneth doubtfully. "Where is she now?"

"In Switzerland. She wrote to me last from Berne. Mrs Evelegh is the name of my friend that she is with. Have some more tea?"

When Sir Kenneth left the house he stood for a moment on the doorstep and took out his pocket-book and wrote "Evelegh—Berne" in it, and then hurried on through the London streets.

If he had not been in love with May Heathcote that same day when he left Oxford—if he had not been in love when he parted from her that chill autumn morning, when the hoar frost lay on the paths, and the dead leaves fluttered down in the damp avenue, and his heart was so sore within him—he was in love with her now! To think he had been separated from her all these months! To think she hadn't a happy life, the girl he had imagined wrapped in love, and luxury! To think she was now at the beck and call of some crotchety old invalid! Had she forgotten him? A hundred memories of Strathalloch crowded in on his brain. Poor child! how he had been

wronging her in his thoughts! What confounded hours he had wasted over proof sheets! They might review his book as they liked now: the press-cutting associations should chase him over the Continent in vain!

Meanwhile Mrs Paul entered Sir Kenneth's name in her "Where is it?" book, and put his volume away on the shelves.

"I suppose it was Sybil told him that tale," she said to herself. "How blind they all were at Strathalloch! But if I had known the real state of matters I should never have waited for that boy's book to come out before I wrote to him! I always thought books were printed the moment they were written. Well, I do not think it is too late; and I hope I shall have my reward in Heaven."

CHAPTER X

THE deck of the Rhine steamer was crowded. From the saloon below came the clatter of knives and forks and plates, and up on deck there was a clinking of many glasses. All the little tables under the awning were filled with noisy groups of Germans, drinking Rhine wine and eating bread and cheese, and talking loudly, with strange gesticulations and

vibrating gutturals, that seemed to point to the truth of the Darwinian theory of man's descent. The Rhine, like the English Lakes, is the land of the honeymoon; and there were many brides and bridegrooms sitting about like birds on boughs. Some of them were English, some American, some French, some German. A young British tourist, with his cap pulled over his eyes, and a "Tauchnitz" in his hand, but without a bride beside him. lazily surveyed the groups, and speculated on the strange affinity that mated these people rightly. That tall American girl, with the long thin face and nasal twang-yes, there was her young husband—a thin American, with a worse twang: he was quite pleased with her. So would not have been that little Frenchman. with the pointed beard, talking so rapidly to the gay little Frenchwoman beside him. She was most deliberately powdered, and her eyebrows were in startling contrast to her greenishgold hair; but the little Frenchman was content. Over there was a stolid young Briton helping his bride into a grey ulster: they quite understood one another. Next to them sat an elderly German, with his Hausfrau mildly silent beside him; he called a passing waiter and demanded beer, and when it came he gave his wife her fair share. She drank it and

looked at him with affectionate reverence. Yes, there is a Providence to superintend the world. The young tourist with the "Tauchnitz" had a schoolboy longing to be able to mix them all, as he had once done, in the mischief of very early youth, with the numbers on the hats and coats at a great evening party. What confusion would result! He laughed to himself; then he yawned, shut the "Tauchnitz," pulled his cap down over his eyes, and got up and sauntered along the deck, looking listlessly at the vine-clad banks of the Rhine.

"Of course a halo of romance hangs over the vine," he said to himself. "Otherwise one might be tempted to think of the beans in one's kitchen garden."

As he turned to pace the deck again, his eye was caught by a group at a table near. They were evidently British—at least the three ladies were, though the little man in the brown velveteen coat, with the bottle of wine and the large thick wineglass in front of him, had a distinctly foreign look. They were difficult to diagnose. The elderly lady looked tired and distraught. She leant back and gazed wearily at the scenery. The other lady was young, and tall, and elegant. She was doing nothing, and she looked cross. Was the elder lady her mother, or the velveteen-coated man's mother?

She somehow did not look as if she belonged to them. And then what relation to them all was the sallow-faced girl hugging a violin case?

At this moment the young tourist caught sight of a man, like unto himself, sauntering towards him along the deck. A tall figure, in British clothes, and with a big cigar emerging from beneath a heavy moustache. He came nearer, and the young man, watching him idly, suddenly started, with a muttered exclamation.

"By Jove! That is Heathcote!—her brother!" he said. "I wonder if he'll see me! How changed he is since Oxford days! I should take the fellow for forty at least. Oh, now I'll find out where she is—at last!"

He made a half movement to get up, and then he stopped. Heathcote was making straight for the family at the little table, and they had turned round to greet him. He dropped into a vacant chair, and the conversation seemed to become general.

"By Jove!" said the tourist slowly to himself, "that is the family!"

He watched for some moments in amazement, then a gleam of humour shot into his grey eyes.

"Heathcote is married—which is his wife?" he thought. "Poor chap!—it must be that one with the lemon-coloured hair and the bad-

tempered mouth. That lady must be the mother—her mother! Yes, I thought she looked different from the rest, poor soul! That must be the man she married! What did Mrs Paul call him?—'beneath her socially?' Good Lord! I should think he was! And who is that young person with the fiddle? And how out of place Heathcote looks! Great Scotland Yard! What a bottle of mixed pickles!"

Then his face clouded over.

"Poor child!" he thought. "What surroundings for her! No wonder she escaped it all!"

Reginald Heathcote had got a little detached from his family again, and had mingled among the crowd. Sir Kenneth Forbes rose and went towards him.

"I don't suppose you remember me, Heathcote?" he asked, in his pleasant voice, ning up behind him.

eginald turned moodily and faced the man ding beside him, but without immediately wering him.

"I'm Forbes of Magdalen," said Sir Kenneth, and I used to meet you at Lumsden's, if you emember him."

"Oh, of course," said the other, with the heartiness of contrition. "Can't say I knew you at first."

The two men looked at one another curiously for a second or two.

Sir Kenneth noticed that Heathcote had changed a good deal. There was a dull, inert look in his eye, and his face had grown heavy. Sir Kenneth would have been taken for much the younger man of the two, though, in reality, there was but a few months' difference between them.

"I heard of you last summer," Forbes said. "I had the pleasure of meeting your sister in the Highlands. She was staying with her aunt, and I was there too."

"Oh, May!" said the other, with a momentary brightening. "Yes, she was there. I remember now, she told me you had been there."

Sir Kenneth looked away, and waited for more.

"She's somewhere hereabouts now," her brother continued, looking up at the green banks they were gliding between.

Sir Kenneth looked up at them, too, with deep interest.

"And you?" he asked, "are you travelling alone, or with your family?" He glanced round as he spoke, and so did Reginald. They both became aware that the group at the table were intently studying them.

Reginald threw away the end of his cigar.

"Let me introduce you to my mother and wife," he said sulkily.

Sir Kenneth followed with an eagerness that contrasted oddly with the other's evident unwillingness.

"Mother, let me introduce Sir Kenneth Forbes to you—Mrs Dubrucq," he added, as if to prevent a natural error. "Sir Kenneth Forbes—my wife—Mr Dubrucq—my sister."

Sir Kenneth bowed all round, with a horrible sensation that he was bowing to the wrong people at the wrong names.

Reginald lit a cigar, and seated himself on the outskirts of the group, with his back almost turned to the company, with the air of one who has done his duty, and washes his hands of the consequences.

"Enjoying a pleasant holiday trip like ourselves, Sir Kenneth?" asked the little man in the velvet coat.

Sir Kenneth assented, with a remark on the scenery. He was looking at May's mother.

"You're a lucky man to be travelling by yourself," the little artist continued, with a laugh. "Look at me! I'm 'personally conducting' this large family party! What a responsibility!"

Mrs Heathcote turned her head away with a

frown, but presently turned it back again. She was very anxious to join in the conversation, but didn't quite see her way.

"It must be delightful to travel in such a large party!" said Sir Kenneth.

"Delightful! my dear fellow!" cried the little artist. His face was slightly flushed, and his coat was powdered with the cigar ash. "You wouldn't call it delightful if you had the bills to pay!"

Mrs Dubrucq coloured. It was the first time her husband had had the bills to pay since he married her. This foreign trip was the outcome of the sale of two pictures. He might at least have worn his new honours gracefully.

"You are doing as we are doing—going up the Rhine instead of coming down it," she said to Sir Kenneth, in a cold, dry voice that contrasted with her husband's boisterous tones. "Every one says we are doing wrong—that it is so slow; but it is much cooler travelling by the river in this hot weather."

"Yes," replied the young man, "and I wanted to see the Rhine—to see it slowly, with the boat stopping at each place as we passed it." He coloured guiltily. He had pictured in his mind that he might see May standing on any of these little piers. He knew from visitors' lists that she was somewhere on the Rhine, but

had not been able to trace her exactly. He had already scanned the crowds at Bonn and Königswinter, but he somehow imagined she was further up the river. Now was his chance to find out. He felt elated and yet anxious. Next moment he might know.

"I met your daughter, Mrs Dubrucq," he said, "last summer at Strathalloch. I was staying with your sister, Mrs Mostyn."

Mrs Dubrucq smiled. "It was very pretty there, I suppose," she said. "I have never been in Scotland at all."

"Have you not?" said Sir Kenneth. It was not what he wanted to learn.

"I suppose you are going to join your daughter now?" he added, boldly plunging into the matter, as he saw she was about to let the subject drop.

Mrs Dubrucq glanced in a troubled way at her husband. The little man was looking irritable, feeling himself left out of the conversation. He always resented mention of his wife's relations: they had not sought his acquaintance.

"Well, I wanted to look May up," he said, testily; and the young man winced at his use of the Christian name. For the first time he realised that this undesirable connection was what he was trying hard to bring on himself.

"She's at a place they call Rüdesheim-easy

to remember because of the wine, you know! We stay a day or two at Coblenz, but we could easily put in a day or two at this Rüdesheim. But my wife's a most unnatural mother; don't care to see her own daughter." The little man looked resentfully at her.

Mrs Dubrucq let her glance rest idly on some far-away object, and vouchsafed him no reply.

Sir Kenneth understood it directly. The mother wished to spare the daughter the encounter, in the presence of her employer.

"Then you won't be able to manage a meeting?" he asked the mother gently.

"Oh yes," she replied wearily. "We shall be a day or so at Bingen, and I daresay she will come over to me."

"She is travelling with a friend," said Mr Dubrucq.

"She is acting as lady companion," said his wife at once.

The little man scowled.

"From no wish of ours, I assure you, Sir Kenneth!" he exclaimed. "But girls now——"

"I don't fancy our private affairs are of interest to strangers!" cried his wife suddenly. She was not a woman of tact, and she let an awkward silence follow her remark, and sat with heightened colour and averted eyes, and her husband fumed and fidgeted opposite.

- "We shall get into Coblenz at six o'clock," said Sir Kenneth aimlessly.
- "Shall you stop there, too?" asked Mrs Heathcote, speaking for the first time.
- "No," he replied turning to her courteously. "It is a pretty little town, rather overrun with the military. I think of going on to some quieter place."

He talked a little more, enticing both Mrs Heathcote and the gaping Joan into the conversation. He noticed Joan's treasured violin case, and said polite things about fiddlers in general. Then he went away with Reginald to smoke and talk over college reminiscences. By a tacit understanding neither of them touched on any subject bearing upon more recent events; and both felt uneasily that Mr and Mrs Dubrucq, relieved of their presence, were probably wrangling over their late disagreement. At six o'clock they reached Coblenz, and Sir Kenneth helped them to land, piloting Joan's violin case over the gangway for her.

The setting sun was blazing down upon the broad square in front of the hotels, upon the bridge of boats over the wide river, upon Ehrenbreitstein perched on the rocks opposite. Sir Kenneth watched the party fall into the hands of hotel porters, and conveyed by them

across the square. Then he hailed a tipsy lounger who was whistling Wagner with much feeling, and got his portmanteau carried ashore. He drove rapidly to the station and took a ticket for Rüdesheim, thus arriving there late that same evening.

Certainly there was no denying that the Dubrucq family was not a pleasant one. This was what Sir Kenneth Forbes thought to himself, as he drank his coffee under the trellised vines outside his little hotel next morning. They were a fact that had to be faced. And yet May had separated herself so completely from them! It was not, after all, as if the more objectionable members were really related to her. What a motley crew they were!

The young Scotchman got up, and hummed to himself in the dear familiar Doric.

"But I'll come and wed ye, In spite o' them a'!"

and he strode out to seek her, having already ascertained that there were no English ladies in his hotel.

CHAPTER XI

MEANWHILE Mrs Evelegh and May and Mrs Elliot, Mrs Evelegh's friend, had taken their

books and writing-cases, and gone up in the steam car to the Niederwald, where shade was procurable. After an hour or so of wandering through the paths of the splendid forest, the two older ladies grew tired, and sought about for some place to rest and read in. But then the awful question of snakes arose, and was not to be gainsaid. Snakes there were in these foreign woods - horrid, insidious things that wriggled among the fallen leaves, and whose sting was instant annihilation! The end of it was that the two ladies, still chattering excitedly, returned by the steam car to the village, to write their letters at peace in the trellised verandah, and May was left alone in the forest, with injunctions not to lose herself-but with no cautions against the deadly reptiles that had driven the others away.

She walked along the broad centre path, and soon found herself at the foot of the National-denkmal.

May stood looking up at the bombastic memorial, and reading the inscription. Several little groups of people were doing the same.

"Aber das ist doch kein *National*denkmal," said a woman's voice plaintively. She had lost her husband or brother in the war.

Two men near began singing "Wacht am Rhein," and kissed each other with fervour.

May moved away, feeling intensly British and patriotic, not to say insular and prejudiced. When she turned she saw the glorious view of the Rhine below her, the view that the monument gazes down upon. She felt a little throb of home-sickness. She had been eight months away from England.

"'Sist so schön im fremden Lande, Doch zur Heimat wird es nie!"

she thought. And then she looked up and saw Sir Kenneth Forbes coming rapidly towards her, with glad eyes and outstretched hand.

The home-longing was still in her eyes when she greeted him, but she greeted him with dignity, and was angrily aware of the throbbing of her heart. But Sir Kenneth was in no wise disconcerted by her manner; he had seen the light in her eyes when he first approached.

"I met your mother, and your brother, and the rest yesterday," he said to her.

She looked at him, and then away at the view again.

"Yes, I am hoping to see them all soon," she said. "I have not seen my people for so long—it will be a great pleasure—I am looking forward to it," she added, almost defiantly.

He looked down at her tenderly.

"They told me you were here," he said. "I

haven't seen you for a very long time; will you not say you are glad to see me?"

She turned her little proud face round to him, and then her dignity melted under his glance.

"That is hardly logical!" she laughed, with a little return of her gay humour. He laughed too, happily.

"Shall we walk on?" he asked. "There is a beautiful view along here, I believe, and—and a coffee garden."

"There is always a coffee garden!" she said. But she turned and walked with him.

"Have you heard of Miss Mostyn's engagement?" he asked her.

"Yes," replied May shortly. She was angry with herself.

"Do you know," he said, lowering his voice, and looking away from her at the tree tops in front of them, "I understood all this time that you were engaged too?"

She looked up at him with frank surprise.

"17"

"Yes," he went on. "And I thought that—that was why you told me not to come. Do you remember? The morning I went away?"

She bit her lips and flushed scarlet.

"I don't see that that would have made any difference," she said coldly.

"It would to me," he answered quickly.

She did not answer.

"It was Mrs Paul told me it wasn't true—last week. Do you know I have been all over Switzerland looking for you, and I have stalked you at last!" he cried joyously, like the boy that he was.

They were in a little side path, with the trees interlaced overhead, and the silence of the forest around them.

Suddenly his voice changed.

"May!" he said, bending down to her, "you know what I have come to ask of you?"

"I haven't much to offer you, except myself," he told her ruefully, as they sat under a big tree some minutes later, trying to realise what had happened so suddenly in their lives. "I am as poor as a rat; but I daresay we can manage."

"But Im not!" she exclaimed joyously, lifting her eyes shyly to his face.

He looked down at her with surprise.

"But I thought——" he began, and then stopped.

"I can bring you that!" she cried. "It is all so new to me—I can't believe it even now, though I have read the letter often enough! You may read it now," she added, with a delicious sense of some one having dominion

over her. She drew the lawyer's letter_from her pocket and gave it to him.

He read it through, and then sat idly holding it.

She looked at him quickly.

"You are not vexed?" she cried.

"He must have been very fond of you, May!" the young man said slowly.

"Yes, I am afraid he was," the girl answered simply.

Sir Kenneth turned and looked at her curiously, but he was apparently satisfied.

"I wouldn't have asked you if I had known," he said suddenly. She laughed, and then he did so too.

"Do your people know?" he asked her.

"No!" she answered shortly.

"Does-Mrs Evelegh?"

"No," she replied serenely. "She is rather nervous and excitable, and so I didn't tell her, for I thought it might disturb her and spoil her journey home."

Again he turned and looked at her. Then he put out his hand and took hers, that played with the fir-cones at her side on the grass.

"We must go," said May, without moving; "we have been here for years."

He put the lawyer's letter back into its envelope. As he did so, the four-leaved clover, which had been loose inside it. fell out.

"Did the legal firm enclose this token?" he

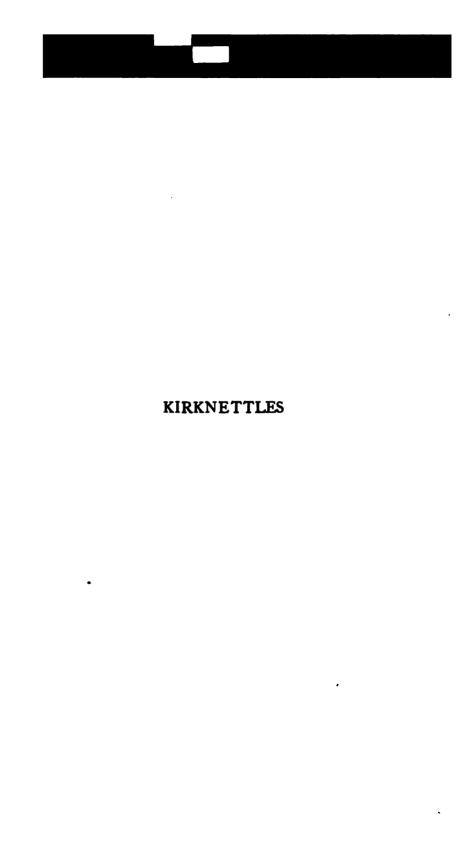
asked her, picking it up.

"No," she said, smiling; "but I found it just after I had read the letter. I must own I am very superstitious."

"And this is the luck it brought you?" he

asked, handing her back the envelope.

"No," she answered, with her head averted.
"I said I had found it after I had read the letter. A four-leaved clover foretells, you know—"



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KIRKNETTLES

CHAPTER I

OLD MYSIE GRANT stood rubbing her lean brown hands, and talking to the minister, who was paying but scant attention to what she was saying, while his small beady eyes followed a woman's figure along the distant road.

"Yes, yes," he answered, with ill-concealed impatience, "I have no doubt your niece was always quick as a child. Quickness is not a thing to be encouraged in children."

Mysic suggested that it was the one thing that needed no encouragement. Alison, she informed him, had always been a favourite with the late minister, in spite of the fact that she had been very rebellious at Sunday-School, and had driven the teacher distracted by the questions she had put to him.

The young minister looked grave. He had heard the stories before, and he always looked grave at them.

Meanwhile, the figure he had been watching had disappeared round a bend of the road, and the minister made a movement as if to continue his walk.

"Will you not come in and rest a bit, sir?" Mysie asked, with Scottish hospitality.

"Thank you, not to-day," answered the man, his little eyes blinking nervously. It was his habit to visit each of his parishioners once a year, and he had called on Mysie Grant in summer.

Mysie stood at her cottage door, and watched her spiritual guide as he walked slowly down the road, his black clerical garb making the one dark object in the landscape. When the bend in the road hid him from view, she turned indoors again. He was not a favourite with her, and he never had been. She recalled to herself his introduction to the parish, when he had come out of the vestry so nervous-looking and flustered that it had made many of the congregation nervous out of sympathy. It is trying for a shepherd to feel that his sheep are in a mood of severe criticism; and Scottish sheep are all metaphysicians, and very independent in their attitude to their shepherd. Opinion was, however, outraged on this special occasion, for the poor young man, in mounting the narrow steps into the rickety pulpit, had hit his head a resounding knock that had echoed through the church, and had caused one of the elders

in the front seat to rise to see if he were hurt. The minister had knelt a few moments, and hid his face in peaceful seclusion, and then risen and faced the eyes of his congregation, with a big red swelling, the size of a golf ball, on his forehead. The general impression had been that he would not do; and first impressions are hard to efface. Mysic remembered it all as she poked her kitchen fire and put on the potatoes, and she flung in the salt with a contemptuous gesture.

Meanwhile, the subject of her recollections was speeding down the high road, where he soon overtook the grey-eyed Alison, Mysie's niece.

"Good-morning," he said to her, without removing his hat; and then he walked on by her side.

The minister had thought once or twice that Alison would make him a good wife. It was lonely up at the manse, and the old woman in charge there did not make him very comfortable, and the disused drawing-room had a musty scent in it. There was one drawback to Alison—not her social position, the orphan niece of old Mysie Grant, for the minister had himself been the eldest son of a family who lived in a thatched croft by the moor-side, and who would have thought Mysie's stone cottage and trim garden grandeur itself. Besides, Alison's only brother was a missionary in Japan; and Alison would soon adapt herself

to her new situation and to the musty drawingroom at the manse. No, the drawback was that Alison's views were not sound, and the minister felt that a wife with unsound views would be most unsuitable to his tastes.

"Have you made up your mind to join the Church?" asked the minister, growing red in anticipation of strife.

Alison's grey eyes rested on some far-off object, but she said nothing.

"This hesitation is most condemnable," said the minister.

"You would not wish me to take such a step without consideration, would you?" replied Alison mildly.

"It is the Church of your fathers—the Church for which they suffered and were martyred—the Church for which your brother is now striving amongst the wild and savage heathen in distant lands," said the minister, incoherent with energy. "Would you stand apart from it?" he asked, turning to her with blazing anger in his face.

But, unfortunately, Alison was smiling—a smile brought up by the term "wild and savage heathen," as applied to the Japanese. She quickly banished the smile.

"What you say is very true," she remarked politely.

The minister thought she was beginning to relent, and added eloquently—"The Church that

numbers amongst its followers the most noble Christians of the age, and is the most——"

- "I must go in here," said Alison, pausing at the door of the post-office.
 - "Will you tell me if-"
- "My letters will be late. I see they are sorting them," she went on.
- "I will wait for you," answered the minister stubbornly.
- "Better not. I am going in to see the baby: it has been very ill."
 - "Whose baby?"
 - "The post-mistress's. Did you not know?"
- "No. Take care it is not something catching, Alison."

He walked on; and Alison went into the post-office. She had only one letter, carefully hidden under her shawl. It was addressed to—

"Mr ALEXANDER DONALD, c/o Mrs M'Crathy, 1002 Warriston Park Road, Edinburgh."

"Is it in time?" she asked with affected carelessness.

"Time enough," replied the post-mistress.

Alison passed into the little back room, where a girl sat holding the sick baby. The poor mite was terribly thin, and its little legs hung down helplessly as Alison took it up and soothed its dying cries.

CHAPTER II

MR FLEMING was much respected in the parish of Kirknettles. In summer he lived in a large house a little way out of the village, and drove in to church on Sundays, and put his horses up at the "Black Bull." He occupied a big square pew on the right-hand side of the pulpit, and the row behind was entirely filled by his maid-servants, with the coachman at the outside The coachman usually came in a little late, after seeing to the putting up of his horses, and creaked up the aisle with his eyes fixed on his master's face. Mr Fleming always sang very loud, and a little behind time with the precentor. Indeed, he had every right to do so, for he had painted the whole inside of the church, and headed the subscription for the new pulpit.

The Sunday after the minister's conversation with Alison, the congregation of Kirknettles were taken by surprise. Besides Mr and Mrs Fleming and their daughter Mary, there was a strange young lady in the pew with them. Her dress proclaimed her as from the town. "Not at all suitable for the Lord's House," the elder women thought; but the younger ones drank in with their eyes, in amazement and yearning admiration, every detail of the perfectly fitting white dress, the elaborately

twisted and curled gold hair, and the dainty hat, with a whole garden of flowers nestling on it.

As for the girl, she appeared to be interested in all that was going on. She drew off her long gloves and laid them on the table in front of her, displaying white, shapely hands. She scanned the congregation as they came in—the old women, with their poke bonnets and shawls, and clean handkerchiefs folded round their Bibles; the old sun-dried men, with their seedy black coats and their snuff-boxes; the young men, with shiny red faces and clean collars that rasped their poor red throats; and the village girls, with their strange attempts at Sunday finery. Her eyes rested longest on Alison Grant, as she followed wrinkled Mysie up the aisle. Alison's bonnet was not becoming, and her grey Sunday gown was creased and badly fitting, but her face looked superior to the other young faces round her.

"Probably a lady's maid," thought Blanche Halford, as she caught Alison's grey eyes fixed on her, and turned her head away. "I never saw such an uninteresting congregation in my life," she added wearily.

Then the door at the foot of the pulpit stair opened, and the minister and the precentor came in. The minister went quickly up, let himself into the pulpit, without knocking his head this time, and vanished behind the stuff

sides. Presently he rose into sight again and gave out the first line of a metrical psalm, which, with a few preliminary attempts to settle the key, the precentor, who had taken up his stand immediately below the minister, began to sing. After one line, which the people sang sitting down and in double slow time, they stopped, and the minister gave out the second line, and the process was repeated. When the psalm had been got laboriously through in this manner, the minister stood, with closed eyes, and began a long extempore prayer. The congregation now all stood up.

Blanche Halford's blue eyes opened wide and wider as the proceedings developed. She glanced at Mary Fleming for sympathy; but Mary was accustomed from early infancy to the service, and never noticed her English friend's amusement. By the time the sermon began Blanche was tired out. Fortunately, she did not know that it was going to last an hour and a quarter, and so imagined each moment would be the final one. At the end of threequarters of an hour her weary white eyelids closed, and she leant back, the strong white light from the great square glass windows glaring down into her face. The congregation were too absorbed to observe her; they were leaning forward with their eyes fixed on the preacher, drinking in his every word.

"My friends," he was saying, "there are

some hearts made of stone; they will not listen to the voice of the Lord. I was travelling once in the South"— here Blanche opened her big eyes and began to listen, but he meant only Dumfries—"and there was a young girl sitting opposite to me in the carriage. And the spirit of the Lord came upon me that I should speak to this girl and testify to her of the one saving faith. So I leant across and said to her, in earnest tones: 'Are you a Christian?' She looked startled, and replied 'I am a Churchwoman.' 'You may be that; but are you a Christian?' I repeated.

"The hardness of her heart was terrible in one so young, my brethren. She answered, 'I do not care to discuss these subjects with a stranger,' and took a book out of her reticule and began to read. The book was a novel. with a picture on the outside savouring of the things of this world. But the Lord gave me strength, and I waited. She read for an hour, and then she closed the book on her lap and looked out of the window. I bent again towards her. 'Are you a Christian?' I said. She leant back and feigned sleep. I knew this was a mere device prompted by Satan, and I waited patiently. The moment she opened her eyes I leant again towards her and repeated my question. She went out at the next station. But I discovered that she got out, not because it was her destination, but-can you believe it,

my brethren?—to avoid answering my question; for when I got out at a later station I saw her on the platform. 'You will not forget my words?' I said, as she hurried past me. 'Indeed, I never shall!' she answered.' So the Lord had blessed that chance seed I had sown."

There were only two hearts in the church that bled for that unknown traveller. One was Alison's—she for whose sake the story had been inserted—and the other was the fair stranger's.

"Oh, if there were only some one here to sympathise and see the fun of it!" she thought. "How I shall make them all laugh at home."

She glanced up, her eyes dancing, and they met Alison Grant's for the second time. Those two lives, so utterly different, had met, and were going to affect one another.

"I must ask Mary who that girl is," Blanche thought; and at that moment the sermon came to an end at last, and Blanche rose, and sat down again quickly, when she found no one else moved.

CHAPTER III

It must have been very dull at The Beeches, for Blanche Halford was quite elated, after a

week's stay there, to hear that the minister was coming to dinner. The minister dined at The Beeches regularly once a fortnight. "Poor man," Mrs Fleming used always to say, with a certain patronising satisfaction, "it is pleasant to think he gets a really good dinner every other week."

On this occasion he took Mrs Fleming in to dinner, and Blanche followed with Mr Fleming, Mary bringing up the rear alone. After grace Mrs Fleming's attention appeared to be absorbed in the soup.

"Do you play tennis, Mr Scott?" asked Blanche abruptly.

The minister had not yet subsided from asking the blessing, and merely gasped.

There was a moment's silence, and poor Blanche looked up bewildered. "I am always saying the wrong thing," she thought. "What is it now? I wish it were time for me to leave."

"I do not play the game you mention: I am a minister," said Mr Scott.

But Blanche was growing desperate.

"Oh, of course, I know you are," she said. "That is why I asked you. Tennis is such a favourite game with clergymen."

The minister raised his eyes and looked at her. His lady acquaintances were few; in fact, they were limited to Mrs and Miss Fleming. There was something so utterly different about Miss Halford from all the women he had known that he felt bewildered. She was not clever—indeed she said several very stupid things during dinner. She appeared to think too much of dress, and not to be in the least interested in Church matters, or subdued by the presence of a minister; and yet the minister felt awkward and bashful in her presence, and became aware suddenly of a thousand personal defects that he had lived for thirty-two years totally unconscious of.

This girl, so perfectly self-possessed, so accustomed to the purple and fine linen of this world, so utterly indifferent to the awkward young man opposite to her, whom she had. since the beginning of dinner, given up as hopeless, utterly upset the minister's ideas of his own character. He found himself noticing the way her rings flashed when she moved her slender hands, and the slow way she turned her head when she was spoken to. And then he shook off the numbness that was creeping over his faculties, and began to talk in his most pompous fashion to his host. And instead of listening to him, Blanche turned and began talking to Mrs Fleming, and the minister stopped in the middle of a sentence to hear what she was saying.

She was talking about Rome. "We met them when we were in Rome," he overheard her saying. "Have you been in Rome?" the minister asked.

Blanche waited till Mrs Fleming had answered her remark, and then turned to the minister. He felt that he had interrupted them.

"Yes, we spent two months there," she replied.

"It is the chief seat of idolatry," said the minister.

"Oh, it is a glorious place." answered Blanche. "I could never get tired of it. We didn't half see all there was to see. We were there in Holy Week, and I could not have imagined anything so impressive if I hadn't been there. Do you remember Schiller's description of it in 'Maria Stuart?' Oh, I thought very little of our English Cathedrals when I came home, after the churches in Italy. Certainly Lincoln is beautiful, but then—oh, the incense and the heavenly music, and the magnificent colouring, and the painted glass, and all the priests and choristers!"

The minister gazed at her in consternation.

"Did you go into the Popish churches?" he asked.

The girl looked at him in wonder, and answered simply: "Of course! Why, it is one of the chief things you go to Italy for!"

Suddenly the minister thought of his own little church, with its bare walls and white

windows and cobwebs, and the thought forced itself upon him—"What must she have thought of it?" But he dismissed the idea quickly, and turned to her again.

"Have you travelled much, Miss Halford?"

he asked.

"No-not really travelled: I have never been out of Europe."

The minister had never been out of Scotland, and winced.

"I think you have been in most countries in Europe," said Mrs Fleming.

"I have never been in Russia, nor Austria, nor Turkey," she replied laughing. "I want father to take us to Turkey: he always promises to, and then he never gets further than Italy.

Once we got him as far as Greece; but we stayed only two days, so I can hardly say I

have been in Greece."

After dinner Mr Fleming had some letters to write, and sent the minister into the drawing-room, promising to join him directly. Mrs Fleming was knitting by the fire, looking very sleepy. Mary and Blanche were leaning over some music on the piano.

The minister sat down at a table at the further end of the room, and began turning over the leaves of a photographic album. Presently Blanche began to play. She played very well, but without any feeling. She wandered from one operatic air to another, and

then suddenly broke into a brilliant waltz. "Do call that poor man over here," she whispered to Mary under cover of her music; "he looks so wretchedly unhappy, and yet he will never come unless he is asked! I am willing to martyrise myself if you are."

But evidently Mary was not, for she made no effort to call him; and the minister, whose morbid sensitiveness was highly irritated tonight, noticed the girl's whisper and half glance at him, and felt himself on fire. He rose to go, and wished his hostess good-night.

"I regret I cannot wait to-night to worship," he said tersely.

Mrs Fleming took off her spectacles and looked at him in sleepy wonder.

"Dear, dear, you are in a hurry, Mr Scott. Mr Fleming will——" she began; but the minister did not wait to hear the end of her sentence. He took a few steps awkwardly over to Mary and Blanche, gave his cold hand limply to them each in turn, and then found himself outside, striding homewards.

Never in all his life had he felt so wretched. Never in all his life had he before been conscious of possessing hands and feet, nor so at a loss what to do with them. Never in all his life had it dawned upon him that his conceptions of the universe—the ego and nonego of it, but more especially the ego—were narrow and imperfect. And all this had been brought

about in one evening by a town schoolgirl. He gnashed his teeth and swung his stick fiercely. Brought up as the one clever member of his family, his opinion respected and his authority regarded, he had early become dogmatic and dictatorial. His time at the University he had spent pretty much alone, too poor and proud, too shy and quarrelsome, ever to make friends. In the holidays he had returned to receive the homage of an admiring family. From this he had gone straight to a country village, to be its spiritual guide and administrator.

As he passed the Grant's door he glanced at the kitchen window. It was lit up, and Alison, with her sleeves rolled up, was standing at it washing the supper dishes.

The minister gave a harsh little laugh. She had destroyed that for him too.

CHAPTER IV

SANDY DONALD had come home for his summer vacation, and he went straight from the station to Mysie Grant's cottage to visit his sweetheart, Alison. He met one or two neighbours on the way, but he merely waved a passing greeting, and hurried on. Then came Alison herself down the road to meet him, and

he slackened his pace, and they sauntered on together.

"So you are really a doctor now, Sandy—Dr Donald?" said Alison presently.

"Yes, all our dreams true at last—nearly all!" he answered.

At that moment the Flemings' carriage passed, with Mary and Blanche in it. Sandy Donald took off his hat in answer to Mary's kindly bow to him.

"Is that that sweet-looking girl's fiance?" asked Blanche, when they had passed.

"They are cousins, and I think they are engaged," answered Mary.

"Did you notice the lady with Miss Fleming, Sandy?" asked Alison. "She's staying at The Beeches."

"Is she?" he answered abstractedly. He had left the town streets thronged with many such daintily dressed ladies; they were not such objects of curiosity to him as to the gossips of Kirknettles; and he was tired of town and all that reminded him of it, and wanted to talk to Alison.

Alison and he were cousins, and they had lived in neighbouring cottages and been brought up together. Sandy was two years older than Alison; but from very early days Alison had taken the lead and Sandy had humbly followed her, with absolute confidence in her superior powers. There had indeed

been a time when the positions had been different, when Alison was four, and wore a checked pinafore and her hair in little paper screws all over her head, and her cousin was a sturdy little boy of six, with bare legs, and a garment that was a cross between a kilt and a petticoat. In those days they used to go handin-hand bird-nesting, the boy pushing eagerly on in front, and the little girl hanging behind, one hand being held firmly by his, and the other in her mouth. But those days of freedom did not last long. A time came when Alison's hair was taken out of papers, and Sandy became the proud possessor of a new suit of clothes made by his mother, and the two children were pushed out of doors and sent, still hand-in-hand, to the village school, Mysie and Sandy's mother, Mrs Donald, standing at their respective doors watching, with their hands shading their eyes.

"They're a bit frighted, poor bairnies," said Mrs Donald.

"Ech, they're together," replied Mysie, and the two women turned indoors again.

The children went down the road, all the unknown horrors of life before them; and now it might have been observed that it was Alison who was a step in advance, pulling the boy after her. And the position remained so for the rest of their lives.

At school both children were quick at their books, but Alison worked the harder. In the

evening they would learn their lessons sitting on two stools in one of the cottage kitchens, or, in summer, on the top of a gate or behind a haystack; and then it was always Alison who explained, and Sandy who humbly learned.

When Sandy was about fourteen he deserted his little cousin for two years, and went about with the village boys, and affected to despise girls' society. These years were very lonely ones for Alison; but she waited, knowing he must return. And one day he did. She was sitting on the doorstep knitting, and he came up hot and breathless.

"Alison," he cried, "father wants to put me into a trade! And, oh, Alison, you remember all our talk?—I was to go to town to the college!"

He had come to her because he was in trouble and wanted sympathy, and he knew he would get it. Then was her time for revenge for his neglect; but she never thought of it, nor of the two lonely years. It was sufficient that he had come back. She smiled a little as she got up and sauntered along by his side, still knitting, and heard patiently the account of his wrongs. The end of it was that, by her advice, he worked for three years with his father in the woodshed—his father was the village joiner—and ground himself in Latin and Greek and mathematics in the evenings, Alison working with him, sometimes

being taught, sometimes teaching, sometimes merely sitting by him sewing; or, in moments when he appeared despondent, putting the books aside and tempting him out for a walk along the river-banks, and talking about the days when he should go up to town, and of all he would do and achieve, and of how the people in the village would stare when he came back a doctor, with the highest honours his university could give. And so they would plan the future till the young man's face would glow and his arms swing with suppressed energy.

And nothing was said about Alison in all these castles in the air; but somehow it was always taken for granted that she would be there by his side.

And then, when the three years were over, Sandy went to his father and told him of his university project; and Alison waited outside with clasped hands in an agony of suspense.

But the old carpenter met the lad's ambition half-way. He had been very steady these last three years, and his diligence at his books had not escaped notice. The old man cherished the belief that his house had produced a genius, which is quite a common thing for a cottage in Scotland to do.

So Sandy went to Edinburgh with very little money in his pocket and a great deal of ambition in his heart, and found many others like himself lounging about the quadrangle, or

scanning the notices stuck up by the class-room doors. He worked ten hours a day without ever dreaming of any recreation or pleasure except a walk on Saturday afternoons out to the Pentlands or down to the Forth. He returned at the end of a year more lean and shabby and penniless than ever, having made a few firm friends and a very few acquaintances, and with unquenched ambition and several certificates and class prizes in his box, which he presented to Alison. And so the years had passed, and now Sandy was M.B., C.M., and he had come back with the glow of his hardly-won honours upon him, and the congratulations of his professors in his ears. Come back rough and awkward still, but gentle as a woman to the suffering, and filled with energy and love of life and reverence for his work, and with high resolves and manly ambitions—the first of which was to ask Alison to let her position in the sunny landscape of his future be a little more settled than it had been.

CHAPTER V

THE minister went almost daily to The Beeches. He despised himself for doing it. According to his poor circumscribed and prejudiced conscience, this girl, who had so affected

the minister's very being, was a worldling, outside the pale of the Church—a wandering sheep, whom he, as pastor, ought to strive to bring into the fold. His conscience told him that this was his simple duty—to save her soul, which would otherwise be lost. But his instinctive common sense, which was not so highly developed as his conscience, and had not been allowed hitherto so much influence over his actions, rose in alarm at the bare thought of addressing Blanche Halford on the subject of her spiritual welfare. So the days passed, and now Miss Halford's visit was drawing to a close.

"It is nothing to me whether she goes or whether she stays," he said to himself, frowning darkly at a big ox-eye daisy that was blooming at the side of the road. "She belongs to a different sphere from mine: it is as if she were a being from another world!" The minister had undergone a serious change, or he would not have noticed this, or allowed himself to suggest, even in the privacy of thought, the potential existence of any other world save the orthodox three.

He paused in the middle of the road to decide if he should go to the Flemings that day or not. For a moment he wavered; he had no possible excuse for a visit, and was not clever enough to invent one. Then, with an angry blow of his stick, he hit the head off the

big daisy, and, turning on his heel, walked on in the direction of The Beeches.

Blanche and Mary were sauntering about the garden together.

"Isn't it a lovely hot day, Mr Scott?" said Mary, as she shook hands with the minister.

"Don't you think it would be delicious to have afternoon tea outside in the garden?" said Blanche, turning to her persuadingly.

Mary looked doubtful; they had never done such a thing.

"Don't you think we should all catch cold, and it would be nicer indoors?" she said.

"Nicer indoors! Oh, Mary! And fancy catching cold on a day like this! Why, tea tastes much better outside with spiders floating about in it, and midges driving you mad when you drink it. Besides, that is the chief joy of the country—not to be bound by all the horrid habits of town."

"I will ask mother if we may," said Mary, still unconvinced; and she walked towards the house.

"Are you fond of country life, then, Miss Halford?" asked the minister, sitting down by her as she sank lightly on to a bank at the edge of the lawn. Mr Scott was not accustomed to adapting himself to artistic surroundings, and he selected a tree root to sit on, and drew his feet up close together, and uneasily balanced his stick across his knees.

"Oh, very, in summer," said Blanche. She took two rosebuds out of the front of her dress, and smelt them lazily, and stuck them in again. To her "the country" meant smooth lawns and trimly-kept avenues, far vistas of shady parks, with gnarled trees and with cattle browsing; to her "the country" meant a great houseful of guests and merriment, morning rides, evening impromptu dances and theatricals. She was longing for the end of this visit, a dull duty visit, promised in the days of schoolgirl intimacy. When it was over she was going up to the Highlands to pay some more, to wile away the time till her parents returned from abroad. But to the forgotten minister on the tree stump "the country" meant the dreary manse standing in its straggling, neglected kitchen garden, with the musty drawing-room and its horse-hair sofa, and the dark diningroom with its mahogany table and its religious prints.

"It is pleasant in winter too," he said, "when —when one has one's life and daily occupations there. Doubtless, for a mere visit the summer is pleasanter."

"It is delicious to-day," said Blanche, taking off her hat and letting the sun stream down on her soft gold hair.

The minister glanced at her anxiously. "You—you'll get the sunstroke!" he said.

"I shall have to get inured to sunstroke,"

replied Blanche, smiling, as she leant back and half closed her eyes.

"Why?" asked the young man, with a puzzled expression in his little eyes.

"Because I am going to India soon."

"To India!—with your parents?"

"No, I am going to be married," replied Blanche stiffly. She suddenly realised to whom she was talking, and, resenting the introduction of familiar and personal conversation, sat up and put on her hat, and froze into sudden dignity, and failed to notice the utter pallor that overspread the minister's face, or the desperate way in which he blinked his eyes. Had she noticed these things, she would have attributed his strange behaviour to the hot sunshine which was pouring down upon him. Any human being has a perfect right to have sunstroke; but there are other rights which are distinctly limited, and which it would not have entered into Blanche Halford's soul to connect with Mr Scott of Kirknettles.

At this moment Mary came across the lawn.

"Mother says we had better have tea in the drawing-room," she said. "Do you mind, Blanche?"

"Not in the least," replied Blanche; but she put up her eyebrows with the least touch of scorn as she followed her friend indoors.

The minister left soon after.

"Good-bye, Miss Halford," he said, approaching her last. He had meant to make a speech about her future happiness, but she gave him her hand quickly, with a smile, and then turned and finished some remark she had been making to Mary about a projected drive; so he had merely to drop her hand, and, for want of anything better to do, walk out of the room.

Blanche sat down by the window after he had left, sipped her tea, and gazed listlessly at the shadows of the trees on the lawn. Suddenly, the tall dark figure of their late guest emerged from among the shadows, and walked quickly to the bank where they had been sitting. He seemed to look about on the ground, and then picked up something, took his pocket-book out of his pocket, put the thing in, and walked quickly away again through the trees.

"He must have dropped something," Blanche thought; "he seemed to know exactly where to find it!" Then suddenly she looked down at her dress where the two rosebuds had been. There was only one there, and it was hanging out by the end of its stalk.

An angry flush overspread the girl's face, and died away, and left her with a look of vague incredulity. She got slowly up and left the window. As she passed a table where stood a bowl of roses, she took the little half faded rose out of her dress and stuck it in among its fresher brethren in the bowl.

But the other little fragrant pink bud lay in the cracked leather pocket-book, where it was as out of place as was the fair image of Blanche Halford in the dim and cobwebby heart of the spiritual administrator of the parish of Kirknettles.

CHAPTER VI

THAT was the last time that the Rev. Mr Scott saw Blanche, for the next Sunday the fair stranger's place was empty in the Flemings' pew. The minister preached a more gloomy and dogmatic sermon than ever, and the attention of the congregation was transferred to Sandy Donald. Sandy wore a black coat and looked quite different from what he had looked last year, and he sat between his mother, who beamed proudly under the red poppies in her bonnet, and his old father, the carpenter. And the young man looked frequently across at Alison, who kept her eyes demurely on her book. Only once, in the middle of Mr Scott's most eloquent peroration, did she raise them with a smile of infinite amusement, which was quite unaccountable, for the Rev. Mr Scott was at that moment consigning, with dark satisfaction, the greater number of his fellow mortals to unremitting torture.

"We are getting nearer to it, my brethren,"

he said. "Nearer and nearer. We none of us know how near we may be to the pit of fire, and yet we spend our days in laughter, which is as the crackling of thorns under a pot. We are nearer to it than we were at this time last year; we are nearer to it than we were when we ploughed our fields in spring-time; we are nearer to it than we were when we met in the Lord's House last Sabbath; we are nearer to it than we were when we started to walk to the Lord's House this morning."

There was a pause, and the inhabitants of Kirknettles bowed their heads. There were some silver-headed men and women amongst them, whose simple lives were well-nigh spent, and who were waiting reverently for the Message. The minister leant impressively over the stuffed side of the pulpit. "We are nearer," he said hoarsely, "nearer to the pit of fire than we were when the last words left my lips!"

One or two members of the congregation started, others shivered, and Sandy Donald felt instinctively for his instrument case; but the minister went on with his sermon, and a stray beam of sunshine played across his reading-desk. There was a certain comfort in remembering the soundness of their own views here in Kirknettles, and in comparing them with those of the thousands of their fellow-beings living in sin and darkness; but then the minister's descriptions brought the eternal sufferings very close!

"Alison, I don't want to upset your mind, but I have been thinking a good deal lately, and—do you believe in all that?" asked Sandy abruptly, as they walked home between the corn-field and the turnip-field.

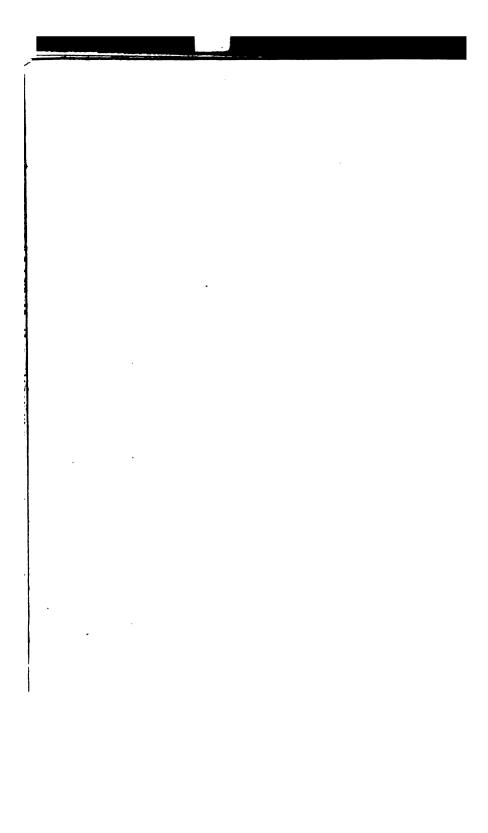
Alison smiled. She had begun thinking when she was eleven, and while he was still spinning tops.

"No, I don't," she answered, and the young

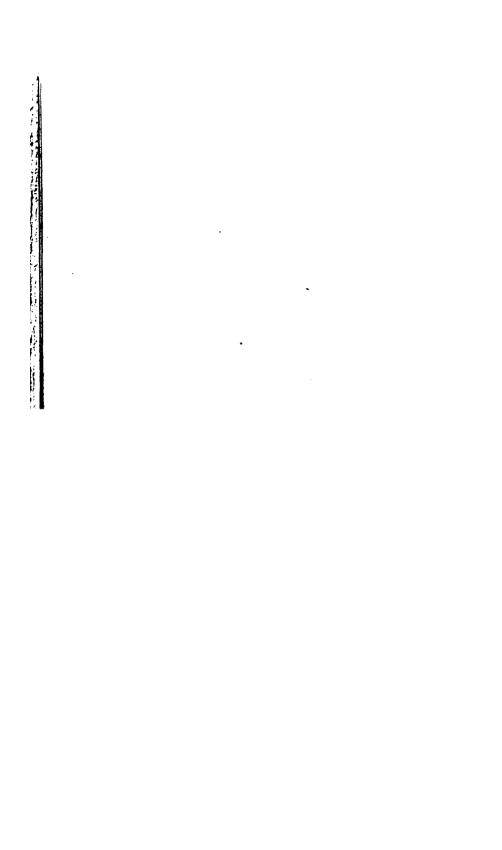
"I think the microscope brings us nearer to God than anything else does," he remarked, soon.

As they stood there in the bright sunshine among the ripe grain, with the scent of distant clover in the air, and with nothing to break the country stillness except the songs of the birds and the rustling of the trees, the minister passed them, black and gloomy, and went along the white, sunny, dusty road, and opened the gate that led to the lonely manse with the musty drawing-room. There was a black cat with shining green eyes basking with an air of proprietorship on the weedy path; but she rose with alacrity, and fled in among the tangled bushes.

"Dour deevil!" remarked Sandy carelessly, But Alison's eyes followed him pitifully.



A NEGATIVE ROMANCE



A NEGATIVE ROMANCE

CHAPTER I

IT was the sort of house where you find no fire in the drawing-room in the morning, and where afternoon tea is not a matter of daily consumption, because the dinner hour is six o'clock. No current literature lay on the tables; and the vases were numerous, but remained ever innocent of flowers. The house was situated in a cold and grey city north of the Tweed—a city in which Respectability walks abroad unabashed.

The inhabitants of the house were three in number—Mr and Mrs Monro Smith, and their widow daughter, Mrs Robert Ogilvie. But every household, even with such unpromising materials, has a romance, be it a positive or a negative one; the only difference is that in houses where the drawing-room fire is not lighted in the morning, and where the dinner hour is six o'clock in the afternoon, the romance is generally inclined to be negative. It was so in the household of the Monro Smiths, and it

consisted in the absence from home of the only son, Andrew. Now from very early days Andrew Monro Smith had rebelled against the parental rules and customs, and his absence from home was brought about by this spirit of insubordination.

Mr Monro Smith was a little man, bald, blanched in the face, and with a querulous, cracked voice. He belonged to the firm of M'Intyre, Smith & M'Intyre, S.S.C.; and whether it was that being sandwiched between two canny Highlanders squeezed the breath from his body and the guineas from his pocket, or whether it was that there are a good many S.S.C. firms in the town, it is difficult to say; but Mr Monro Smith did not find himself growing wealthy as he grew older. business he was rather subservient to his two partners, both better lawyers than himself. He had seldom been inside their houses, which were in streets adjoining his own, nor did the wives of the firm call "for" each other. Inside the office the communications of the men of business were confined as nearly as possible to the scriptural "yea" and "nay,"—and this not from any unfriendly feeling, but merely because they were men of a dour, taciturn, and unsociable type.

Such was Mr Monro Smith out of doors, but on his own hearth he assumed the *rôle* of autocrat. His wife, who was faded and insignifi-

cant, was afraid of her little lord; and Mrs Robert Ogilvie, who was large and lean, had been reared to be of a submissive spirit. Monro Smith was a man of regime. always breakfasted at a quarter past eight, read his letters and the Scotsman, snubbed his timid wife and scolded his lean daughter, ignored his sulky son, made the family generally wretched and nervous and irritable, and then started for his office at twenty minutes to ten o'clock. He intended that his son, when his schooling was over, should sit on one of the high stools in the office of M'Intyre, Smith & M'Intyre, S.S.C., and thus perhaps get in the thin end of the wedge, and gradually make the space occupied by Smith between the two Highlanders a little more commodious and lucrative. He would as soon have thought of allowing Andrew to choose a different mode of spending the life with which his Creator had endowed him, as he would have thought of consulting his wife on a business matter, or helping his daughter to The thing was an imselect her bonnets. possibility. This being the case, it inevitable that, when Andrew left his school at the age of sixteen, he should request his father to allow him to "go in for medicine." This suggestion led to unpleasantness between father and son. As the boy was now no longer at school, the father regarded him as past the age for the application of Solomon's pet rod, which had hitherto been his usual method of expressing a parental interest in the boy's welfare. Andrew, on the other hand, resented in every fibre the repressing and unsympathetic nature of his parent. The unpleasantness consequently fermented.

"I cannot think what put medicine into your head," said Mr Monro Smith to Andrew, in an irritable tone.

"Well, considering that law and medicine are the two staple professions, father, I don't think it is very queer that it should have occurred to me," replied Andrew gloomily.

"Well, what hinders you at the law?"

"I hate law! Sitting in a dark office biting your pen all the day! Now, if it were the Bar—there is some fun in pleading——"

"Andrew, you're havering! Where do you suppose I've got the money to pay for the preliminaries?—let alone that I would have to keep you for ten or twelve years, till your hair was grey, before ever you took a fee, or did anything except walk, walk, up and down the Parliament Hall, and wear out your boots and repeat idle gossip."

"Well, let me go in for medicine, then, father. I don't care much for it; but it is just a choice between that and the law, and I hate law, and I will never make a lawyer. Half the fellows I know are going in for medicine, and at any rate it does not bind you

to the north side of Edinburgh for all your days."

But Mr Monro Smith was obdurate, and to a stool in the office Andrew went. He was there for only six months, and then the elder Mr M'Intyre interfered.

"Your son is not suited for the work, he is just a hindrance here," he said. "I told him yesterday to copy out that Libel, and when I came in, I asked him if he had got it finished, and he said: 'Finished? I'm still in Genesis!' Your son will never make a lawyer, I tell you!"

Mr Monro Smith glanced round the office. "Where did you doited loon get the Bible?" he was heard to mutter.

But that ended Andrew's career as lawyer. Mr Monro Smith saw there was no thin end to that wedge. As medicine was all that was now left, Andrew got his own way. He went to the University for three years, and was then duly plucked for his Second Professional. During the first two of these three years he had gone backwards and forwards daily between his grey home and his grey Alma Mater, and he had dined at six o'clock with his parents and his sister, and spent his evenings working in his attic. His life was made of work, and his only relaxation consisted of walks. His father did not encourage him to talk, though he occasionally questioned him as to his pro-

gress. His mother did not profess any interest in his pursuits; her husband had never cared for her to concern herself in men's matters, and she usually sat silent at such times as these subjects were broached in her presence, neither expecting nor being expected to join in the conversation.

At the end of the second year, when Andrew was nineteen, he ceased to spend his evenings in work. He went out. He asked for a latch-key, but it was severely denied him. On being questioned as to where he had spent his evening, he would reply that he had "gone to look a fellow up," or that it had been the "Students' Night" at the theatre. As a matter of fact, these excuses were true; but that made little difference. All the poor boy did was looked on as wrong-doing. There were several unpleasant scenes at this period, which culminated in an especially unpleasant one when Andrew announced that he was plucked.

Mrs Monro Smith took no part in these scenes, as of course the education of his son was the father's duty, and Mr Monro Smith brooked no interference. As a general rule, Andrew received his father's admonitions with a sulky silence. The last occasion, however, was more serious. Even the worm will, we have all been told, turn when trodden on; and on this occasion Andrew turned. He was heard very distinctly to call his parental resi-

dence a "beastly hole," and to use equally undutiful epithets regarding his nearest blood relatives.

After this he kissed his mother, which astonished and put her about almost as much as did his heated language, and then ran upstairs, where he was heard stamping and dragging things heavily upon his floor. Suddenly the front door banged, and at six o'clock his place was empty at the dinner table. That was the last that was heard of Andrew; and the romance of the house of Monro Smith became the negative one of the absence of the only son.

A year after this domestic catastrophe the daughter Jane married the family minister, the Rev. Robert Ogilvie. It was thought a very excellent marriage, and the newly-married couple went to Ayr for their honeymoon. But bright things come quickly to confusion, and the Rev. Robert died in a year of an attack of softening of the brain, which had set in shortly previous to his marriage, and Jane returned in her widow's weeds to her father's house, her mild and proper expression of grief toned down by an augmented sense of her own importance.

The household had then continued its daily life in uneventful monotony, broken only by a letter from Andrew the third year after his leaving home. This letter informed them that he was doing fairly well in the world, had insured his life, and didn't owe a shilling; that he had married a very sweet and amiable wife; and that, if his father would consent to overlook the somewhat abrupt nature of the departure he had been constrained to make three years ago, it would ease his, Andrew's, conscience, and be a great source of happiness to his wife. This letter, however, remained locked up with Mr Monro Smith's papers, and docketed "unanswered." Mrs Monro Smith had, on the occasion of the receipt of the missive, overstepped the bounds of wifely duty, and expressed a humble desire to see her son again.

"I have been thinking him dead, Stephen," she said; "and now to know of him doing well, and with a wife! It seems hard that we should never see him nor her, and perhaps little ones who will bear the name. I'm sure I would like to see him again, and what like his wife is. It seems throwing away the gifts of Providence—and him steady again, too!"

But Mrs Monro Smith's natural yearnings were repressed by her husband. Mr Monro Smith stated it as his opinion that it was his son, not he, who had wilfully cast aside the gifts of Providence.

"He had everything to his advantage here, if he had stuck at his work as I did before him—I, with not half his chances—he would now be stepping into my shoes, and on a fair

road to be a partner. Instead of which, what is he? 'Doing fairly well in the world,' he says! Mighty well, forsooth, when he cannot even tell me what he is! And married to a 'sweet and amiable wife'! When a man calls his wife sweet and amiable, you may feel pretty sure he can say nothing else about her. Andrew has probably married beneath him: or, to speak more accurately, has married a young woman of the rank of life to which he has lowered himself since leaving my house. But I do not wish to discuss the matter: I have stated my wishes, and I expect them to be obeyed. A man must be master in his own house. The husband commands, and the wife must obey. That is right and proper, and as it should be, for it is the husband who has the sense, and who holds the purse-strings."

So Mrs Monro Smith succumbed, as she had often done before. And Mr Monro Smith found an unexpected ally in Andrew's sister.

"I quite agree with father," she said, pursing up her lips and bending her head over her worsted work. "It is very odd in Andrew, I consider, not to mention what profession he has adopted. It looks strange. If he had said, 'I am a doctor,' or, 'I am a minister,' but, indeed, how could he be either? And as to his wife—he tells nothing about her. 'Sweet and amiable'! Why, that is just what you could say of any woman. I believe he has gone on

the stage and married an actress, or the like of that. I am sure my Robert would have agreed with father. I have heard my Robert frequently pass the remark that if folks threw away their birthrights, they had no occasion to expect others to take up their quarrels."

So, as both the living and the dead appeared to be against her, Mrs Monro Smith sighed, and began to think she must be wrong.

Now Mr and Mrs Monro Smith were very far from being in Society-not only in the pungent and subtle sense of even knowing what "in Society" meant, but also in the much more human sense that they rarely had anybody inside their house, and were not given to social intercourse with their fellow-creatures. Therefore Mr Monro Smith had preserved a too high appreciation of his own importance, for he derived it from the attitude towards him of his abject women-folk, and this is an unsafe standard for any man. He would not have expected to hear great things of his son's wife; very little would have satisfied him, but the vagueness of Andrew's letter, and his disregard of all detail in announcing his marriage, appeared the reverse of what was proper. "We have always kept ourselves to ourselves," was the Monro Smiths' usual boast: it is considered a most respectable attitude towards the outer world.

Perhaps the Monro Smiths were not very far wrong in their surmises about Andrew, for he was an assistant in a chemist's shop in the Strand, and he had married his landlady's daughter.

CHAPTER II

THE second reminder that the Monro Smiths received of their prodigal was in a woman's handwriting. It came six years after the first, and it found the family unchanged, save that the dinner hour, to meet the requirements of the age, had been postponed to half-past six o'clock, and that the worthy lawyer looked smaller and older as he took out his spectacles to peruse the missive. It ran thus:—

"DEAR SIR,—Your son Andrew is lying in hospital, very ill of infamation of the lungs. The doctors say as how he is not likely to live, and I think as you and his mother may like to try and undo the past before it is too late. My daughter, his wife, has been with him night and day through his illness. He has been a good husband to her, and is, in my opinion, a son as any one could be fond of and forgive. Pardon me writing so free.—Your obedient servant,

"P.S.—There is a little son five years old come Easter."

All the heart that the family had came to the surface on receipt of this letter. Mrs Monro Smith wept over the postscript.

"Well, I'm sure I've had my troubles," she said.

Mr Monro Smith and his wife prepared to start to London by the afternoon express. The letter had arrived at breakfast-time, so they had some hours in which to think about it before it was possible to start.

"Don't cry, Maria. The woman might have telegraphed!" exclaimed Mr Monro Smith, fret-

fully pacing up and down.

"She is probably a perfectly uneducated person, father; you could scarcely expect her to exercise much discretion," said Mrs Robert Ogilvie sententiously. "My Robert used always to say that Andrew——"

"We will not discuss Andrew now, Jane. He may be lying dead at this moment. It is hardly fitting."

Andrew's mother sobbed aloud, and his sister was silenced.

When Mr and Mrs Monro Smith arrived at the great glass doors of the hospital ward, they were met by the Sister. With a grave face she led them into her own room, telling them that the patient was asleep at present. Mr Monro Smith glanced furtively up the ward before he followed his wife and the Sister, and he saw a screen drawn round one of the beds, and a sharp pang of remorse penetrated the tough fibres of his being.

Andrew had died five minutes before, with his wife and his little son by him.

"Will you see the wife?" said the Sister,

when she had told them. "She is here now. The poor girl is almost distracted."

Mrs Monro Smith looked wistfully at her husband, but the little man pulled her to him by the arm.

"No, no—not yet!" he exclaimed. "Not now; later on."

It was not until the morning after he had attended the funeral that Mr Monro Smith had an interview with his daughter-in-law. He had thought the matter carefully out. He had an elderly maiden sister who lived in semi-genteel poverty close at his doors, and was a source of continual annoyance to him in that she looked to him for substantial help in money matters, and also because she continually served to remind him of a somewhat shabby past. So it occurred to Mr Monro Smith that, as he was legally bound now to provide for his grandson, he might kill two birds with one stone by sending the child to be brought up by his sister, thus paying the board of the one to the other. He suggested this scheme, with many repetitions and circumlocutions, and with legal phrases interspersed, to the widow of his son, till the poor girl was quite bewildered, only managing to grasp the one fact that another woman was to bring up her child.

"She is a lonely creature," said the lawyer, "and I've no doubt it would be quite a diversion for her."

His daughter-in-law flushed. She was a pretty, quiet girl. Poor Andrew had thought her beautiful.

"It is too soon to talk of all this," she said.
"I can't part with my child now—indeed, I never could. You were not very kind to Andrew, and I would not let my baby be brought up—no, no! I don't know how we shall live, but mother and I—we'll keep Baby."

"You'll think it over," said Mr Monro Smith, and he rose to go.

"Well," said the little lawyer to his wife, when he returned to her at the hotel, "I have seen the young woman, and told her of my plan, but she will need time to get used to it. At any rate we may feel we have done our duty. It is a fine child, Maria; it features me."

"What made you think of your sister Jemima, Stephen? She can't bear children," replied his wife.

Mr and Mrs Monro Smith were leaving London that night. Mr Monro Smith was to join the table d'hôte at the hotel; but it was arranged that Mrs Monro Smith was to make her evening meal at an ærated bread shop.

At five o'clock a little forlorn Scotchwoman might have been seen threading her way through the crowded thoroughfares, and appealing anxiously to a policeman to put her into the right omnibus.

Mrs Monro Smith had a very guilty conscience as she was jolted along. She was doing an unheard-of thing. She was going, without her husband's permission or knowledge, to visit her grandchild, her son's orphan.

She held her umbrella very tight, and wondered if she should ever get back in safety to the hotel again, and what her husband would say to her if he found her out. Her small heart beat in great thuds against her thin ribs, and her colourless eyes filled with tears of excitement and pain.

When she was turned out of the omnibus by the friendly conductor she had several dingy streets to walk through, and it seemed to her as if she were lost, and alone in London. But she was not going to give up now that she had come so far. At last she reached the house, the address of which she had written on a little piece of paper that she held in her hand. It was a small shop, and there were a few wooden steps leading to a room above it.

Mrs Monro Smith paused, and then ascended these steps. She did not wish to meet her son's mother-in-law. She knocked at the parlour door, and stood breathlessly waiting for an answer, but none came; only a slight movement in the room betokened that there was some one there. Mrs Monro Smith paused, then knocked again. Still no reply; but still the sound of some one moving.

Mrs Monro Smith pushed open the door and went in.

The kitchen was absolutely neat and clean. On the table there was a meal spread of the humblest description. The fire was out, and on the hearth in front of the empty grate sat a small child of five years old, with bare, scratched knees and a Toby-dog frill, who stopped playing with some ninepins in order to gaze at the stranger.

"What is your name, dearie?" asked Mrs Monro Smith in a trembling voice.

"Tandy," replied the infant shortly, and he re-arranged his ninepins, and began knocking them down with a bit of firewood.

"Where is your mother, Tandy?"

No reply, but increased interest in the ninepins.

Mrs Monro Smith stooped and lifted him up, held back the curls from his forehead, and gazed long at his face; and the child stared back at her with round eyes.

"See, I knew your father when he was a wee laddie like you—but you're not like him, he was always darker. Do you mind your father, Tandy?"

"Daddie's dead," said the child, suddenly losing his shyness. "'E's gone right away up into the sky!"

"Oh, my wee orphan laddie, my boy's bairn!" cried the woman. "I wish I could take you

home with me; but he would never let me speak of it!"

The child struggled free of the tearful embrace, and began to whimper. Mrs Monro Smith felt in her reticule, and produced a weird zoological specimen on an elastic, and dangled it ingratiatingly in front of Tandy. He looked at it seriously for some time—he was unaccustomed to new toys—and then he burst into a howl of terror and dismay.

Mrs Monro Smith tried to soothe him; but she was not clever with children, and her little formal phrases had no effect. Presently the child caught sight of his ninepins, and toddled back to them, bending a little tear-besmutted face close over them, and uttering little indignant sobs every now and then at the insult he had received.

Mrs Monro Smith sat and watched him, and then she rose and laid a little bundle on the table. It was a black frock and hat for the child, and a few sovereigns which she had taken from her own savings, and that she had deposited in the pocket of the frock; but she did not dare to write any message with them—her courage was not unlimited.

"Will you kiss me before I go, Tandy?" she asked.

The child's face cleared at the prospect of parting, and he consented.

"Tell mother your Grannie was here, and left those for her."

"But Grannie's gone with mother to see Daddie in the big garden."

Mrs Monro Smith wept afresh.

"Tell me about Daddie, dearie!" she cried.
"Oh, tell me about your Daddie!"

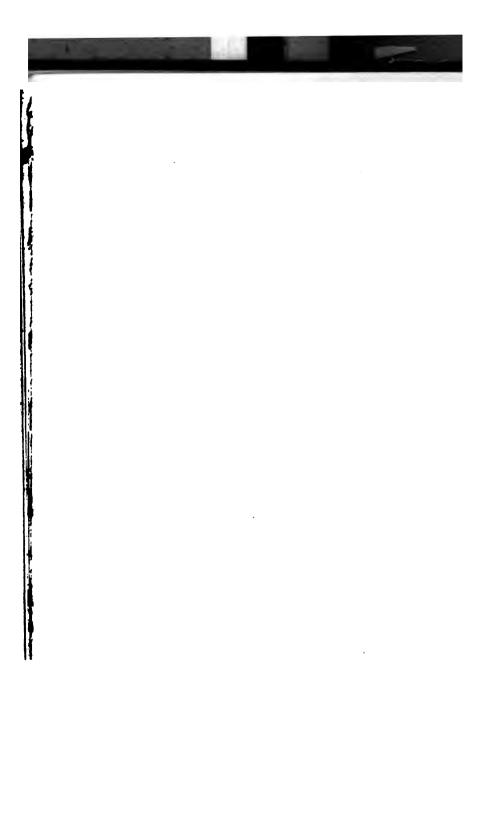
"About Daddie?" repeated the infant, turning his childish gaze upon her. "Why, we took Daddie to the big garden, and we threw flowers down into a dark 'ole. That is what folk always does when folk dies. They goes and throws flowers down into a dark 'ole."

Mr and Mrs Monro Smith returned home by that night's train, and Mrs Robert Ogilvie, clad in new mourning, met them at the station.

"I thought it best," she explained to her mother, glancing down complacently at her crape trimmings. "My Robert always said that the least we could do was to show a proper respect to the dead."



NOT TENDER, BUT TRUE



NOT TENDER, BUT TRUE

HE was a queer, uncouth figure as he stood before me, twirling his cap. He worked in a shale pit, or a mine, or something, and his clothes were very dirty—so dirty as almost to obscure the patches. He had big, hobnailed boots, uneven legs, and a shuffling gait. He stooped from the shoulders, and his face was surrounded by a short, unkempt, piebald beard; and he had a most awe-inspiring squint.

"I am sorry she is so ill," I told him, dodging the wrong eye. "Would she like some tea, do you think, or—anything?"

The man shuffled on his feet, and squinted all round him. "I hes tea for her," he said, in a slightly indignant tone. "She's no wantin' for onything I can buy."

"Oh!" I said, feeling rather snubbed. We had only lately come to the place, and I was filled with zeal for the poor people round about; but somehow this man was not ingratiating. I had pictured nice, clean, respectful women, and curtseying children. Still, he had voluntarily

sought me with his tale of a sick wife; most of the poor people had held aloof, evidently regarding us as aliens.

"Would she like me to come and see her?"

I hazarded.

"Maybe she might," he replied, with considerable condescension.

"Very well, I'll come," I said.

Still he stood, twirling his cap. Then suddenly he squinted diabolically, so that I nearly screamed.

"Ef ye'd spare her a floo'er!" he cried.

The murder was out: he had been squinting at my flower-beds. That was what he had come for.

It was early in June, when flowers, at least in bonny Scotland, are not very plentiful. I had some people coming to dine with me the next day—new neighbours, on whom I wished to make a good impression. Still, the man was not to be denied.

"Surely!" I cried, with enforced heartiness. I went in and got my scissors and garden gloves. He gave a great guffaw at the sight of the gloves, which made us better friends.

"It's a peety to sile them," he told me.

Then he went from flower to flower like a great steadfast bee, and I was not allowed to stop till I had culled all my choicest blossoms for his invalid wife.

"He must have some good in him," I

reflected, when he had gone off with a great sweet-smelling bouquet in his grimy paw; and the thought somewhat consoled me for my devastated garden, and the fact that he had barely thanked me.

Two days after, I went to see the wife. It was a tidy little cottage—or rather room, for the front door seemed to open directly into the kitchen, though there was really an inner and an outer door, with about a square yard of passage between. It struck me that it must be draughty, not to say damp, in wet weather. The kettle was on the fire, and a wooden arm-chair was drawn up in front of the hearth, and a few tradesmen's calendars were nailed against the yellow-washed walls, and little china ornaments and cups and saucers stood on shelves. The woman lav in a big bed in an alcove, surrounded by chintz curtains, with her wasted hands lying on the patchwork coverlid. One glance at her hollow face showed me that she had not long to live, and I had a quick stab of compunction at having grudged her the flowers. She was much more courteous than her husband, poor soul, and asked me to be seated, half raising herself on the bed to see if there were a free chair, and then sinking back exhausted by the effort. She thanked me for the flowers, which were in a jug of water beside her, with her Bible, and a cup of milk. She put out her thin hand and touched them, and hoped "he" had not been over bold in asking. I sat with her for about twenty minutes, and promised to come again.

Well "he" was not lacking in boldness, for "he" got into the habit of coming regularly for flowers. If I missed a day or two in going to see the wife and taking them myself, he would come in on his way from his work to fetch them, and would look gruffly reproachful, as though I had been neglecting my duty. But during my talks with her, I found out what a good soul he really was. I think she felt a little nervous as to his methods, and so purposely dilated on his virtues. They had no children, and their cottage being a little apart from the village, they had no near neighbours. It appeared that the husband got up at four every morning, lit the fire and boiled the water, made his wife a cup of tea, and then tidied the room, even going down on his knees and scrubbing the floor, and dusting the ornaments, "as handy as a woman, ma'am, if you'll believe me." Certainly the cottage redounded to his credit, if his appearance did not. made his own breakfast, washed up the dishes, brought in coals and water, and left everything ready, and started to his work at a little before six.

"But who looks after you during the day?" I said.

"Well, ma'am, a neighbour comes in and gives me what little I want. He always stops at her door as he goes along and puts her in mind; but, indeed, she often says he doesn't need to, she'd come without. But it's just his way, ma'am."

Yes, I knew it was!

I held him up as an example to my husband; but Hugh said every one had his own method of showing his regard for his wife, and for his part he gave great thought to his appearance.

In the autumn my husband and I went to the Highlands. The last time I went to see Mrs Forbes before I left, she was so weak she could scarcely speak. She smiled and held up her thin bloodless hand for me to look at it. Her wedding ring, and the guard she wore above it, were tied round and round with a white thread to keep them from slipping off.

"They've never left my finger since first he put them on," she said, in a husky whisper; "but they was like to drop off, so he did that. It was his own notion."

She gazed at the somewhat dirty thread as proudly as she had gazed on the new rings on her wedding day.

The poor woman lingered for some weeks, and died while we were still away in the Highlands. I heard of her death from our gardener, whom I had directed to let John Forbes have

The same of

as many flowers as he liked for his sick wife while I was away. I sent the poor man a heather wreath, and felt very sorry for him.

The day after we returned home I was inspecting the garden. "So Mrs Forbes died," I said to the gardener.

"She did that."

"How is her husband?"

" Just fair demented."

So I went to see him. I chose Sunday afternoon, when he would not be at work, and I knocked at the door in some trepidation. There was no answer. I knocked again. Still no answer, so I peeped in.

He was sitting by the table, bending over and fiddling with something.

"Why, Forbes," I said, "may I come in?"

He looked up at me, and then went on fiddling with the something, whatever it was. His eyes were very bloodshot, and I was afraid he might have been drinking; so, although I pushed the door wider open, I did not venture beyond it.

I looked round the room; it was very untidy. The floor and tables were in dire need of the scrubbing-brush, the fire was unlit, and the grate full of ashes. Dust lay thick everywhere, and the bed was unmade. Some unwashed dishes stood on the dresser, and some dead flowers were in pots on the window-sill. Then my eye fell on the man himself—an uncouth

unshaved object he was—and I saw what he was fiddling with. It was his wife's two rings that I had last seen tied on to her wasted finger. My heart softened to him.

"You must come up and get some white flowers for her grave, Forbes," I said gently.

He looked up in a dull, unresponsive way.

"It's nae use now," he said.

"She was so fond of flowers," I answered.

"She got them!" he replied. Yes—no one knew that better than I did!

"You're not keeping your room very comfortable," I continued.

"It's nae use now."

"Well, there isn't a chair free from dust for me to sit down on," I replied pleasantly.

"Wha's askin' ye to sit doon?"

After that I went.

The months sped by, and John Forbes became a disgrace to the village. He did not drink; but he neglected his work and his house and himself. The neighbours, with that easy friendliness that the poor show to each other, occasionally "redd up" the cottage for him; but otherwise nothing was done to it. The man himself grew surly and savage. At last his master, the owner of the pits where he worked, was told of the man's condition, and went to see him. I heard this story from my husband, for I had some time since given up playing the

Samaritan to John Forbes. The master was high-handed in his methods, and prided himself on being so.

- "How long is it since your wife died, Forbes?" he asked the man.
 - "Twelve month," replied Forbes.
 - "Then you must marry again."
 - "Eh?"
 - "You must marry again."
 - "I'll no!"
- "Your house is a perfect pig-stye, and you yourself are—a disgrace to your first wife's choice. You want some one to look after you, my man. If you don't ask some one to marry you I'll turn you off."
 - "Who will I ask?"
- "Oh, well," said the master, "that's more than I am prepared to say. Surely you——Well—oh, well—yes, there's Martha Smith, for instance, or—or any one! Good-day."

Next morning John Forbes presented himself at the office door.

- "She'll no' tak' me," he announced.
- "Did you ask her?"
- " Hoo else wad I ken that she wouldna?"
- "Wasn't it a trifle sudden?"

He nodded.

"Man alive! Did you have the face to go and just ask her to marry you without any—any—"

John Forbes looked at his master severely.

"Ye tell't me I was to. I'm no ane for palaverin'."

When I heard this story I went to call on Martha. Her indignation had by no means subsided, nor was she backward at expressing it.

"Deed, ma'am, I never kent the man, the ill-faced chiel that he is! I canna mind that I ever spoke wi' him in a' my life. And he came in and threw two rings on to my knee, and says he, 'They're Annie's rings, ye can tak' them or leave them,' says he. 'Then I'll leave them!' says I, 'and will you please to leave me, John Forbes!' says I."

After that, Forbes's love-affairs hung in abeyance for some time, and his house got more and more comfortless. At last I spoke to him.

"Your master advised you to marry again, Forbes," I began, somewhat timidly.

Forbes nodded grimly.

"Well, you weren't very successful last time, but don't you think you might try again?"

"Show me the woman," he replied surlily.

"You must go about it better this time," I told him gravely.

Well, whether my choice was a less ambitious one than the former, or whether Forbes had learnt the art, or whether Mrs Jones was moved by the pity that we are told is akin to love. I do not know. But the banns of

marriage were put up between John Forbes, widower, and Janet Jones, widow, both of this parish.

I knew Janet; she had acted as charwoman on several occasions, and my hopes were rapidly fulfilled. The cottage became a model of cleanliness, and flowers bloomed in the windows; the front patch was weeded and tidied, and John himself was clad in new garments and looked well cared for. But John's temper remained sour, and he glared at every one like a chained mastiff that would like to spring. And Janet's round, cheerful face grew sad, and her eye rested doubtfully on her spouse.

- "Is he kind to you?" I asked her.
- "He never says onything rough, mem; but he's aye fretting."
 - "What about?"
 - "Aboot her."

What could I say? When I told my husband, he said it was a lesson to me not to play the matchmaker.

The couple always weighed on my mind. The poor woman did her duty so well, and was nothing daunted, though the man grew colder to her every day, and treated her to long dissertations on the departed Annie and her various virtues. He did not even pay her the compliment of comparison.

"Deed, ma'am, he just seems to think I'm

as interested in her that's gone as he is himsel'," she told me; but she showed no bitterness.

When I heard of the birth of Mrs Forbes's little baby I thought it would make matters straight, for his first wife had never given him such a gift. I went to call some time after, to offer my congratulations and some little presents I had gathered. The husband was sitting by the fire, with a look of stubborn determination on his ugly face. The wife was propped up in bed, flushed and crying.

"May I see him?" I asked politely.

"Her!" growled a voice correctively from the hearth. The woman wept afresh.

"Oh, of course!" I murmured apologetically; "I heard that it—she—was a girl. What a beautiful baby!" as the woman unrolled a bit of the shawl, and showed me a very undesirable-looking object, hairless and wrinkled.

"What are you going to call her?" I hazarded, feeling something was amiss, and therefore not very sure of my ground. But I had stumbled on to the very casus belli, it seemed.

"She's to get 'Annie'" came emphatically from the fire.

"She'll get ony name there is except just that one! I'll no' hae my bairn called efter anither woman!" said the wife.

It was a most awkward position for a visitor to be in.

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I asked the husband to speak to me outside, and I scolded him roundly.

- "You will make your wife ill," I told him, "worrying her in this way! Surely she deserves a voice in the matter? And it is an insult to her to call her child after——"
- "Insult!" he roared, turning his glittering squint full upon me. "Insult! It's prood she ought to be! It's prood she should be, I tell her!"
- "Yes, yes; I don't mean in that way; but don't you see——"
- "She'll get 'Annie,'" he repeated, and strode away back to his cottage.

I feared I had done no good, and the man was so violent that I was afraid to go back. I was glad, however, to see that Janet had plucked up some spirit at last, and I hoped she would fight it out.

The next thing I heard was that the baby was dead. I picked all the white flowers I had, and went to see poor Janet.

She was lying with the empty shawl wrapped round her, and a dazed look in the eyes that had rested with such pride on the sleeping baby.

"She got baptized afore she died," the woman told me brokenly, at the end of her pitiful narrative. "She got baptized Janet, efter me." She glanced up at me, and her poor eyes filled.

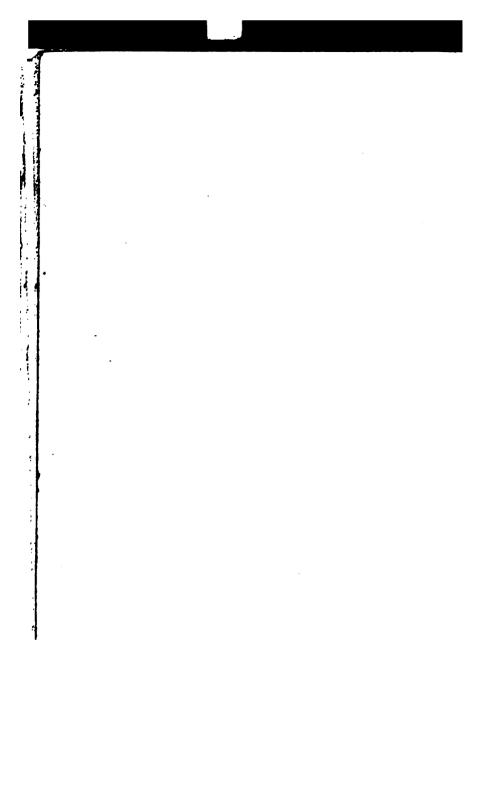
I stroked her rough hand.

"And he's been that kind and gentle to me since, ma'am," she went on, after a pause. "You'd no' believe him to be the same man. He's that sorry aboot the bairn, I didna' think a man would take up so with a bairn. It's just turned his heart to me, it has, the grief o' it. Deed, ma'am, it came upon me it might be her that was sorry for me, seeing her husband that turned against me, and me aye doing my best. Ay, I thought maybe it was her that sent doon the bairn to bring us together. I said that to him."

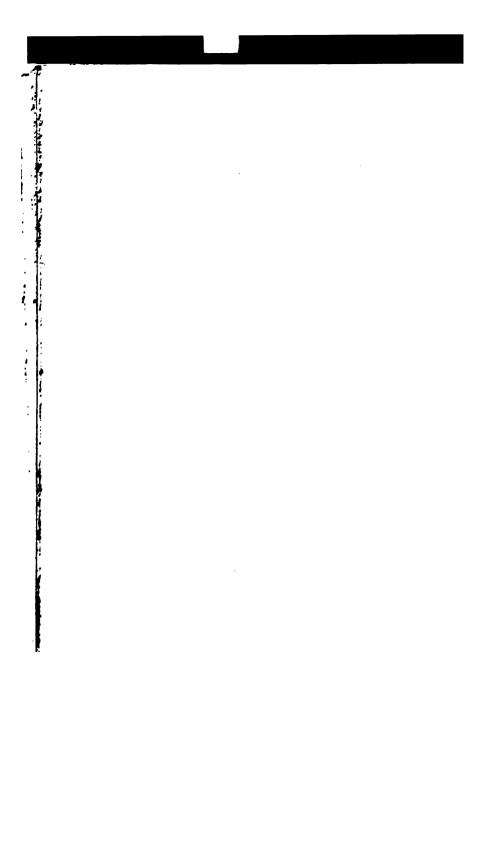
"What did he say?"

Janet Forbes turned a little restless.

"Oh, he said it was like her," she replied evasively. "He sets an awfu' store by Annie."



DRIFT WOOD



DRIFT WOOD

THE worst of story-writing is that all the plots are sad ones, because real life is sad. Equally because of this it is very wrong to write sad stories. And yet, if one finish the stories, how can one help it? Say something pleasant happens, as it often does. Say you are sitting on a garden bench on a summer evening with somebody else, and the moon playing hide-and-seek among the clouds; what could be better? But the next day, or next month, you are sitting on the same bench without somebody else; or she is sitting there with somebody else. And the worst of it is that the moon will behave just the same. The moon is Irish. You know that because it is so sympathetic and delightful one day, and so cruel the next. Well, I will tell my story, and I will avoid the sadness by leaving it unfinished, like a Manx cat.

When I first knew Douglas Fleming he was one of the undifferentiated young men who cluster about a ballroom door early in the evening, and later on throng round the corner of

the supper table where the oysters are. As for Lilian Harcourte, she was a pretty girl in white, with fair hair, and not much to say for herself. The next winter when we heard that they were engaged, they both assumed a kind of interest from the mere fact. Especially one glanced again at him, and wondered if there were any qualities that had attracted her, or whether it had been a mere inability to say no. He hadn't any money, and the engagement promised to be a long one. Time went on, and the young people became a standing fact, and a permanent one. When this state of affairs had existed for three years or so, people began to enquire if there were any talk of the marriage; and then it struck us that, whereas she had remained a pretty, fair-haired girl without much to say for herself-sometimes in white, sometimes in pink, occasionally in black—he had developed into a distinct individual. He was spoken of as a rising man, as a brilliant young scientist. He still frequented ballrooms, but he came late, and looked bored—even when she was there. people said that they saw no reason for the delay. Her father was very wealthy-a man accustomed to float companies could easily float two persons. And still there was no talk of marriage, until one day there was a good deal of talk, for the engagement was broken off. After this Lilian Harcourte went abroad, and

Douglas Fleming went about looking very cheerful and deeply absorbed in his work. He consorted with men older than himself: he was appointed to lectureships and examinerships; he published pamphlets and contributed to scientific journals; and his name figured in the publications of other men of science. In a year she came back, with something decidedly French in her appearance, and in her method of wearing her hair. She was now more than pretty, she was decidedly striking. People wondered if she had got over it, and how they felt when they met; and then, after seeing them meet several times, people ceased to wonder anything about it, and even forgot, when they mentioned his name to her, that they had once been engaged.

It was about this time that I got to know her well. I remember I met her at an afternoon tea somewhere, and we were sitting together on a sofa, and I began to talk to her. I had always known her to a certain extent; but that is what happens in a town the size of ours—you know everybody more or less, and then one day you suddenly have half an hour's conversation with some one whom you have known all your life but never spoken five words to, and you discover how nice that person is, and think what a pity it is that you never found it out before; and then you don't meet again for two years. However, Lilian Harcourte and I

did meet again, for I asked her to come and see me. The intimacy ripened, and presently we were fast friends. My husband didn't like her: he thought her stiff and dull. I told him it was shyness, and he said that shyness covered multitude of sins. He didn't mind her spending her mornings with me when he was out; but he always demurred a little when I poked her into a dinner party. However, it was at our house that she met Professor Vigors. Professor Vigors was a curious little old gentleman, with one eye much bigger than the other -my husband said it came from constantly looking down a microscope—and a startling habit of ejaculating "God bless my soul!" when anything was said to him. He was, however. an eminent man—one of European celebrity. He had discovered an animal with three eyes. and somehow proved by it that we used to have three eyes when we were monkeys, or something like that,—and so, of course, I had to take him down to dinner. But I put Lilian on his other side, and to my amazement she knew all about him, and the three eyes, and everything else. They got on beautifully during dinner, and afterwards she told me with enthusiasm that he had asked her to go and see something-I forget what-at his laboratory, and would I take her?

"But he simply hates lady-medicals, and he rather despises women of any kind!" I cried.

"That makes it all the better," the girl answered.

So we went.

The laboratory was a very big, dirty room, with bottles with beasts in them, and glass cases of bones, and a strange odour—several strange odours. But Lilian seemed to enjoy it. The Professor smiled at her enthusiasm. "You had better come to my class!" he said.

She turned round quickly. "May I?" she asked.

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed the Professor.

I shall always believe it was in that laboratory that I caught scarlet fever, for I sickened for it the very next day. I was shut off from all my friends for the rest of the winter, and then we went away. When I saw Lilian again I was struck by the change in her, and so was my husband. She looked as bright and buoyant as a frosty morning. She talked a good deal about Professor Vigors-he had been "so kind to her "---"so helpful "---"so encouraging " -had "shown her so much." My husband. when I told him, said she would probably end by marrying the Professor; and when I indignantly replied that she was five-and-twenty and he was five-and-sixty, my husband merely observed that it would not be the first time such a thing has been known to occur. Of course I couldn't tell him why he was wrong,

though it is said a married woman is never a loyal friend.

How blind men are! I had always known Lilian's secret, even before she mentioned Douglas Fleming to me. She had only once done so—when some caller had been inveighing against broken-off engagements, and then, suddenly realising, I suppose, that it was dangerous ground, had got up and said goodbye and fled, leaving Lilian and me alone in the firelight. We talked fitfully of other things, and then sat silent for a little. Suddenly Lilian, a shadowy figure on the other side of the hearth, said softly, "I hope people don't blame Mr Fleming. I was never worthy of him, you know. He simply grew beyond me—left me behind."

"My dear girl," I exclaimed, "I haven't the pleasure of Mr Fleming's acquaintance, but as to your not being worthy of him, you wrong your whole sex by saying so. Men are splendid creatures—they do magnificent work—but women are——"

"Fools!" said Lilian, with such bitterness that my flow of eloquence was stopped short; and she took advantage of the pause to change the subject. We never resumed it, but we were better friends ever after the ice had been broken.

It was from Professor Vigors himself that I learnt the extent of Lilian Harcourte's scientific

craze. I met him one day when I was out doing my morning shopping. He stopped me, and I thought it was friendliness, and forgave him for having caused my fever by taking me into that terrible laboratory; but it wasn't friendliness at all, it was the flowers I was carrying home for my table. He merely shook hands, and then adjusted his gold eye-glasses and peered down at them.

"Very fine specimens of *Delphinium Ajacis*," he remarked. "Where did you get them?"

"I bought them at a florist's," I told him, "and if you want to know their names they are larkspurs, and they cost eightpence a bunch. I'll give you a few."

But he refused them: very clever men are seldom mannerly.

"You aren't as interested in these studies as your young friend is?" he remarked.

I am the mother of a baby, and I dislike being treated like a schoolgirl. We used to be taught Botany at Miss Jawkin's—we elder girls had a dozen lectures during our last term—but I never can remember any of the long Latin names except two, and as one is Aurora Borealis and the other is Delirium Tremens, I thought it wiser to say nothing.

"Miss Harcourte speaks much of your kindness," I observed stiffly. But I was melted at once by the warmth with which he praised Lilian.

"She ought to have been a man!" he cried. "God bless my soul! what a waste of ability! The girl has a real love of zoology: she has converted me. I confess I thought but poorly of the sex before. I never believed any of their pretty protestations, any of these modern Why, bless my soul, any first year's student knows more than they do. and thinks less of it! To hear them airing their theories and their knowledge! But this young woman, she grasps what you mean before you've said it! It is a pleasure to meet with such enthusiasm. And as it is a mere chance that she discovered her vocation, I can't help thinking it is the fault of the system, and that there may really be many clever capable women who have never had their chance, but have merely married and become household goods and chattels."

"We shall have you reading a paper before a Women's Franchise Society on the utility of the rational dress, dear Professor Vigors," I said; "but the fact is that, as I am one of the lapsed masses you deplore, I am going into this Registry Office to interview cooks. Good-bye."

But as I walked dejectedly home, not having seen any to suit, I could not help thinking my husband might be right, and I did hope dear Lilian would be sensible when it came to the point.

I gave a little dinner soon after, and asked

them both. I remember I was eating curried prawns, and wondering sadly if the new cook would do as well, when I caught Mr Fleming's name, and looked up. If that very stupid little Professor wasn't regaling Lilian with a eulogy on her former lover! That comes of a man being so wrapped up in his subject that he doesn't know what is going on around him. Lilian was looking rather impassive, and her eyes were lowered; but I noticed the colour in her cheek deepening.

"If she can't trust herself to look up," I commented, "then I should judge the Professor's chances are nil."

"Fleming is one of the most brilliant men we have!" the little gentleman assured Lilian. "I prophesy a future for that man! God bless my soul! His reasoning is as clear as a bell; and as to his methods—his methods are masterly. Have you ever met him?"

I am only a married woman, but I have tact. No one was looking at me, and I tipped over a glass of wine, and then hastily pushed my chair back to save my gown, and succeeded in making a great fuss over the spreading stain on the white cloth.

When we went upstairs after dinner, Mrs Wilkie came and drew me into an alcove. She is a fashionable lawyer's wife, and therefore a great gossip. "I heard some talk about Mr Fleming going on at your end, my dear," she

observed; "but really your husband was so entertaining that I couldn't catch what was being said. How does Miss Harcourte take the news of his engagement? Has she heard it?"

"I really don't know," I replied, "but I don't fancy it would affect her much. All that was years ago, you know; and was it not she that broke it off?"

- "No, it was he," that woman answered.
- "Well, it's a matter of ancient history. And who is he engaged to now?"
 - "To little Mrs Newark."
 - "Are you sure?" I asked incredulously.
- "Oh, yes, indeed! It was at the officers' ball on Tuesday, and he was being congratulated yesterday at the club."
- "Well, I have always heard that clever men marry fools," I said, and then the coffee came in, and made an interruption.

Mrs Newark was a little, empty-headed, heartless, shallow, frivolous, gold-haired widow. She hadn't it in her to care for any man: she only cared for what he brought her. She would marry this man and drag him down; she would utilize his brains and his God-given faculties to procure her a good social standing in the little provincial circle that formed her world. She would blunt the edge of his intellect, and never know—never realise——Bah! what blind idiots men are!

I went over to my writing-table and took a

sheet of paper, and wrote on it "Mr Douglas Fleming is going to marry Mrs Newark," and I put it into an envelope and sealed it. When Lilian came to say good-night, I gave it to her. "Don't open this till you are in your own room and alone—promise me!" I said.

She stood just under the candelabra, and the light fell on her fair hair, and cast faint fantastic shadows of her rich lace on to her white satin, and glimmered about the pearls round her throat. She was looking radiant.

"What is it?" she asked, holding the envelope and smiling at me.

"Not till you are in your room and alone," I repeated, and she promised with a laugh, and went away.

I thought the other guests would never leave; and, when the room was empty, I broke down utterly, and my husband, returning from having seen the last lady to her carriage, was frightened out of his wits, and ran down to get me a glass of wine, which is always a man's first thought.

I didn't tell him, though. I said my fever had left me weak, and that I had been so vexed by the soufflé being smoked. One has to fib, sometimes.

All next day I couldn't get Lilian out of my head. I did not like to go near her. I knew she was too proud to say anything to me, and it would be like prying on her. There are some

things one has to bear alone, however loved one is. My husband came home early that afternoon.

"Well, little wifie, how are you?" he enquired.

I said I felt better, and asked him to bring me a footstool. He brought it, and then he sat on it himself.

- "I say, that souffle must have been very smoked," he observed. "Miss Harcourte is ill, too."
 - "What!" I exclaimed.
- "Old Vigors declared that she has smashed a test tube and shaken his faith in woman."
- "What do you mean?" I asked severely. He knew this sound of my voice, and leant his head back against my knee and told me the story at once.
- "I met Vigors, and we spoke of last night. He was looking very gloomy; and when I mentioned Miss Harcourte's name to him, I found out the reason. He favoured me at some length with his views on women's education, and he instanced Miss Harcourte as an example. It seems he had asked her last night to go to his laboratory at ten o'clock to-day to see some section of a beast or something—hinted it had been a bit of a favour. Your young friend jumped at the invitation, overwhelmed him with gratitude, and went off beaming. Turned up at the laboratory this

morning quite listless and uninterested, and asked utterly unintelligent questions. Poor Vigors was positively plantive."

"Well?" I cried, when my husband paused.

"Well, and then Vigors owned he asked her rather sharply what was the matter, and she dropped the section and spoiled three months' work, and said it was a nasty, horrid, slimy, fishy thing, and that she was tired and hated zoology, and then she fainted away."

"Oh, poor Lilian! It is the air of that laboratory! I know it was there I caught fever!"

My husband got up off the footstool and stood by me, leaning against the mantelpiece.

"And the consequences were that she gave up the study of science; and the world said that you can never tell what a woman's motives are," he observed. "But you are a good little soul," he added; and he stooped down and kissed my cheek suddenly.

I believe he guessed the whole thing.

Well, I said I wouldn't finish this story, for I consider the ending a sad one, though perhaps you won't. Lilian Harcourte and I drifted apart after this; we never spoke of the matter, but the knowledge that I knew must have embarrassed her.

Mr Fleming married the gold-haired widow; but they are not in my set, and I don't see

much of them, though I occasionally meet her driving about in a little victoria. The other day I heard that Lilian was going to wed a wealthy widower, a stockbroker, thirty years her senior—the sort of man whose name is only of value when it appears on a cheque. It seems a pity, when one has only one life, to drift into such a prosaic way of spending it.

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